

PD SHORT STORIES



*Woman Seated, ca. 1895. by Paul-César Helleu (French, 1859-1927).
Brooklyn Museum*

THE LITTLE STEEL COILS, by Anna Katharine Green

THE DUST OF DEATH, by Frederick Merrick White

THE MEN IN THE STORM, by Stephen Crane

THE McWILLIAMSES AND THE BURGLAR ALARM, by Mark Twain

VEROTCHKA, by Anton Chekhov

CHIPPINGS WITH A CHISEL, by Nathaniel Hawthorne

THE FREIGHTER'S DREAM, by Ida M. Huntington

THE LITTLE STEEL COILS

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Room Number 3*, by Anna Katharine Green

I

"A Lady to see you, sir."

I looked up and was at once impressed by the grace and beauty of the person thus introduced to me.

"Is there anything I can do to serve you?" I asked, rising.

She cast me a childlike look full of trust and candour as she seated herself in the chair I had pointed out.

"I believe so; I hope so," she earnestly assured me. "I--I am in great trouble. I have just lost my husband--but it is not that. It is the slip of paper I found on my dresser, and which--which----"

She was trembling violently and her words were fast becoming incoherent. I calmed her and asked her to relate her story just as it had happened; and after a few minutes of silent struggle she succeeded in collecting herself sufficiently to respond with some degree of connection and self-possession.

"I have been married six months. My name is Lucy Holmes. For the last few weeks my husband and I have been living in an apartment house on Fifty-ninth Street, and, as we had not a care in the world, we were very happy till Mr. Holmes was called away on business to Philadelphia. This was two weeks ago. Five days later I received an affectionate letter from him, in which he promised to come back the next day; and the news so delighted me that I accepted an invitation to the theatre from some intimate friends of ours. The next morning I naturally felt fatigued and rose late; but I was very cheerful, for I expected my husband at noon. And now comes the perplexing mystery. In the course of dressing myself I stepped to my bureau, and seeing a small newspaper slip attached to the cushion by a pin, I drew it off and read it. It was a death notice, and my hair rose and my limbs failed me as I took in its fatal and incredible words.

"'Died this day at the Colonnade, James Forsythe De Witt Holmes. New York papers please copy.'"

"James Forsythe De Witt Holmes was my husband, and his last letter,

which was at that very moment lying beside the cushion, had been dated from the Colonnade. Was I dreaming or under the spell of some frightful hallucination which led me to misread the name on the slip of paper before me? I could not determine. My head, throat, and chest seemed bound about with iron, so that I could neither speak nor breathe with freedom, and, suffering thus, I stood staring at this demoniacal bit of paper which in an instant had brought the shadow of death upon my happy life. Nor was I at all relieved when a little later I flew with the notice into a neighbour's apartment, and praying her to read it to me, found that my eyes had not deceived me and that the name was indeed my husband's and the notice one of death.

"Not from my own mind but from hers came the first suggestion of comfort.

"It cannot be your husband who is meant," said she; "but some one of the same name. Your husband wrote to you yesterday, and this person must have been dead at least two days for the printed notice of his decease to have reached New York. Some one has remarked the striking similarity of names, and wishing to startle you, cut the slip out and pinned it on your cushion."

"I certainly knew of no one inconsiderate enough to do this, but the explanation was so plausible, I at once embraced it and sobbed aloud in my relief. But in the midst of my rejoicing I heard the bell ring in my apartment, and, running thither, encountered a telegraph boy holding in his outstretched hand the yellow envelope which so often bespeaks death or disaster. The sight took my breath away. Summoning my maid, whom I saw hastening toward me from an inner room, I begged her to open the telegram for me. Sir, I saw in her face, before she had read the first line, a confirmation of my very worst fears. My husband was----"

The young widow, choked with her emotions, paused, recovered herself for the second time, and then went on.

"I had better show you the telegram."

Taking it from her pocketbook, she held it toward me. I read it at a glance. It was short, simple, and direct:

"Come at once. Your husband found dead in his room this morning. Doctors say heart disease. Please telegraph."

"You see it says this morning," she explained, placing her delicate finger on the word she so eagerly quoted. "That means a week ago

Wednesday, the same day on which the printed slip recording his death was found on my cushion. Do you not see something very strange in this?"

I did; but, before I ventured to express myself on this subject, I desired her to tell me what she had learned in her visit to Philadelphia.

Her answer was simple and straightforward.

"But little more than you find in this telegram. He died in his room. He was found lying on the floor near the bell-button, which he had evidently risen to touch. One hand was clenched on his chest, but his face wore a peaceful look, as if death had come too suddenly to cause him much suffering. His bed was undisturbed; he had died before retiring, possibly in the act of packing his trunk, for it was found nearly ready for the expressman. Indeed, there was every evidence of his intention to leave on an early morning train. He had even desired to be awakened at six o'clock; and it was his failure to respond to the summons of the bellboy which led to so early a discovery of his death. He had never complained of any distress in breathing, and we had always considered him a perfectly healthy man; but there was no reason for assigning any other cause than heart failure to his sudden death, and so the burial certificate was made out to that effect, and I was allowed to bring him home and bury him in our vault at Woodlawn. But"--and here her earnestness dried up the tears which had been flowing freely during this recital of her husband's lonely death and sad burial--"do you not think an investigation should be made into a death preceded by a false obituary notice? For I found when I was in Philadelphia that no paragraph such as I had found pinned to my cushion had been inserted in any paper there, nor had any other man of the same name ever registered at the Colonnade, much less died there."

"Have you this notice with you?" I asked.

She immediately produced it, and while I was glancing it over remarked:

"Some persons would give a superstitious explanation to the whole matter; think I had received a supernatural warning and been satisfied with what they would call a spiritual manifestation. But I have not a bit of such folly in my composition. Living hands set up the type and printed the words which gave me so deathly a shock; and hands, with a real purpose in them, cut it from the paper and pinned it to my cushion for me to see when I woke on that fatal morning. But whose hands? That is what I want you to discover."

I had caught the fever of her suspicions long before this and now felt justified in showing my interest.

"First, let me ask," said I, "who has access to your rooms besides your maid?"

"No one; absolutely no one."

"And what of her?"

"She is innocence herself. She is no common housemaid, but a girl my mother brought up, who for love of me consents to do such work in the household as my simple needs require."

"I should like to see her."

"There is no objection to your doing so; but you will gain nothing by it. I have already talked the subject over with her a dozen times and she is as much puzzled by it as I am myself. She says she cannot see how any one could have found an entrance to my room during my sleep, as the doors were all locked. Yet, as she very naturally observes, some one must have done so, for she was in my bedroom herself just before I returned from the theatre, and can swear, if necessary, that no such slip of paper was to be seen on my cushion at that time, for her duties led her directly to my bureau and kept her there for full five minutes."

"And you believed her?" I suggested.

"Implicitly."

"In what direction, then, do your suspicions turn?"

"Alas! in no direction. That is the trouble. I don't know whom to mistrust. It was because I was told that you had the credit of seeing light where others can see nothing but darkness that I have sought your aid in this emergency. For the uncertainty surrounding this matter is killing me and will make my sorrow quite unendurable if I cannot obtain relief from it."

"I do not wonder," I began, struck by the note of truth in her tones.

"And I shall certainly do what I can for you. But before we go any further, let us examine this scrap of newspaper and see what we can make out of it."

I had already noted two or three points in connection with it to which I

now proceeded to direct her attention.

"Have you compared this notice," I pursued, "with such others as you find every day in the papers?"

"No," was her eager answer. "Is it not like them all----"

"Read," was my quiet interruption. "'On this day at the Colonnade'--on what day? The date is usually given in all the bona fide notices I have seen."

"Is it?" she asked, her eyes, moist with unshed tears, opening widely in her astonishment.

"Look in the papers on your return home and see. Then the print. Observe that the type is identical on both sides of this make-believe clipping, while in fact there is always a perceptible difference between that used in the obituary column and that to be found in the columns devoted to other matter. Notice also," I continued, holding up the scrap of paper between her and the light, "that the alignment on one side is not exactly parallel with that on the other; a discrepancy which would not exist if both sides had been printed on a newspaper press. These facts lead me to conclude, first, that the effort to match the type exactly was the mistake of a man who tried to do too much; and, secondly, that one of the sides at least, presumably that containing the obituary notice, was printed on a hand-press, on the blank side of a piece of galley proof picked up in some newspaper office."

"Let me see." And stretching out her hand with the utmost eagerness, she took the slip and turned it over. Instantly a change took place in her countenance. She sank back in her seat and a blush of manifest confusion suffused her cheeks. "Oh!" she exclaimed; "what will you think of me! I brought this scrap of print into the house _myself_, and it was I who pinned it on the cushion with my own hands! I remember it now. The sight of those words recalls the whole occurrence."

"Then there is one mystery less for us to solve," I remarked, somewhat drily.

"Do you think so?" she protested, with a deprecatory look. "For me the mystery deepens, and becomes every minute more serious. It is true that I brought this scrap of newspaper into the house, and that it had, then as now, the notice of my husband's death upon it, but the time of my bringing it in was Tuesday night, and he was not found dead till Wednesday morning."

"A discrepancy worth noting," I remarked.

"Involving a mystery of some importance," she concluded.

I agreed to that.

"And since we have discovered how the slip came into your room, we can now proceed to the clearing up of this mystery," I observed. "You can, of course, inform me where you procured this clipping which you say you brought into the house?"

"Yes. You may think it strange, but when I alighted from the carriage that night, a man on the sidewalk put this tiny scrap of paper into my hand. It was done so mechanically that it made no more impression on my mind than the thrusting of an advertisement upon me. Indeed, I supposed it was an advertisement, and I only wonder that I retained it in my hand at all. But that I did do so, and that, in a moment of abstraction, I went so far as to pin it to my cushion, is evident from the fact that a vague memory remains in my mind of having read this recipe which you see printed on the reverse side of the paper."

"It was the recipe, then, and not the obituary notice which attracted your attention the night before?"

"Probably, but in pinning it to the cushion, it was the obituary notice that chanced to come uppermost. Oh, why should I not have remembered this till now! Can you understand my forgetting a matter of so much importance?"

"Yes," I allowed, after a momentary consideration of her ingenuous countenance. "The words you read in the morning were so startling that they disconnected themselves from those you had carelessly glanced at the night before."

"That is it," she replied; "and since then I have had eyes for the one side only. How could I think of the other? But who could have printed this thing and who was the man who put it into my hand? He looked like a beggar, but----Oh!" she suddenly exclaimed, her cheeks flushing scarlet and her eyes flashing with a feverish, almost alarming glitter.

"What is it now?" I asked. "Another recollection?"

"Yes." She spoke so low I could hardly hear her. "He coughed and----"

"And what?" I encouragingly suggested, seeing that she was under some new and overwhelming emotion.

"That cough had a familiar sound, now that I think of it. It was like that of a friend who----But no, no; I will not wrong him by any false surmises. He would stoop to much, but not to that; yet----"

The flush on her cheeks had died away, but the two vivid spots which remained showed the depth of her excitement.

"Do you think," she suddenly asked, "that a man out of revenge might plan to frighten me by a false notice of my husband's death, and that God to punish him, made the notice a prophecy?"

"I think a man influenced by the spirit of revenge might do almost anything," I answered, purposely ignoring the latter part of her question.

"But I always considered him a good man. At least I never looked upon him as a wicked one. Every other beggar we meet has a cough; and yet," she added after a moment's pause, "if it was not he who gave me this mortal shock, who was it? He is the only person in the world I ever wronged."

"Had you not better tell me his name?" I suggested.

"No, I am in too great doubt. I should hate to do him a second injury."

"You cannot injure him if he is innocent. My methods are very safe."

"If I could forget his cough! but it had that peculiar catch in it that I remembered so well in the cough of John Graham. I did not pay any especial heed to it at the time. Old days and old troubles were far enough from my thoughts; but now that my suspicions are raised, that low, choking sound comes back to me in a strangely persistent way, and I seem to see a well-remembered form in the stooping figure of this beggar. Oh, I hope the good God will forgive me if I attribute to this disappointed man a wickedness he never committed."

"Who is John Graham?" I urged, "and what was the nature of the wrong you did him?"

She rose, cast me one appealing glance, and perceiving that I meant to have her whole story, turned towards the fire and stood warming her feet before the hearth, with her face turned away from my gaze.

"I was once engaged to marry him," she began. "Not because I loved him, but because we were very poor--I mean my mother and myself--and he had a home and seemed both good and generous. The day came when we were to be married--this was in the West, way out in Kansas--and I was even dressed for the wedding, when a letter came from my uncle here, a rich uncle, very rich, who had never had anything to do with my mother since her marriage, and in it he promised me fortune and everything else desirable in life if I would come to him, unencumbered by any foolish ties. Think of it! And I within half an hour of marriage with a man I had never loved and now suddenly hated. The temptation was overwhelming, and, heartless as my conduct may appear to you, I succumbed to it. Telling my lover that I had changed my mind, I dismissed the minister when he came, and announced my intention of proceeding East as soon as possible. Mr. Graham was simply paralysed by his disappointment, and during the few days which intervened before my departure, I was haunted by his face, which was like that of a man who had died from some overwhelming shock. But when I was once free of the town, especially after I arrived in New York, I forgot alike his misery and himself. Everything I saw was so beautiful! Life was so full of charm, and my uncle so delighted with me and everything I did! Then there was James Holmes, and after I had seen him----But I cannot talk of that. We loved each other, and under the surprise of this new delight how could I be expected to remember the man I had left behind me in that barren region in which I had spent my youth? But he did not forget the misery I had caused him. He followed me to New York; and on the morning I was married found his way into the house, and mixing with the wedding guests, suddenly appeared before me just as I was receiving the congratulations of my friends. At sight of him I experienced all the terror he had calculated upon causing, but remembering our old relations and my new position, I assumed an air of apparent haughtiness. This irritated John Graham. Flushing with anger, and ignoring my imploring look, he cried peremptorily, 'Present me to your husband!' and I felt forced to present him. But his name produced no effect upon Mr. Holmes. I had never told him of my early experience with this man, and John Graham, perceiving this, cast me a bitter glance of disdain and passed on, muttering between his teeth, 'False to me and false to him! Your punishment be upon you!' and I felt as if I had been cursed."

She stopped here, moved by emotions readily to be understood. Then with quick impetuosity she caught up the thread of her story and went on.

"That was six months ago; and again I forgot. My mother died and my husband soon absorbed my every thought. How could I dream that this man, who was little more than a memory to me and scarcely that, was secretly

planning mischief against me? Yet this scrap about which we have talked so much may have been the work of his hands; and even my husband's death----"

She did not finish, but her face, which was turned towards me, spoke volumes.

"Your husband's death shall be inquired into," I assured her. And she, exhausted by the excitement of her discoveries, asked that she might be excused from further discussion of the subject at that time.

As I had no wish, myself, to enter any more fully into the matter just then, I readily acceded to her request, and the pretty widow left me.

II

Obviously the first fact to be settled was whether Mr. Holmes had died from purely natural causes. I accordingly busied myself the next few days with the question, and was fortunate enough to so interest the proper authorities that an order was issued for the exhumation and examination of the body.

The result was disappointing. No traces of poison were to be found in the stomach nor was there to be seen on the body any mark of violence with the exception of a minute prick upon one of his thumbs.

This speck was so small that it escaped every eye but my own.

The authorities assuring the widow that the doctor's certificate given her in Philadelphia was correct, the body was again interred. But I was not satisfied; and confident that this death had not been a natural one, I entered upon one of those secret and prolonged investigations which for so many years have constituted the pleasure of my life. First, I visited the Colonnade in Philadelphia, and being allowed to see the room in which Mr. Holmes died, went through it carefully. As it had not been used since that time I had some hopes of coming upon a clue.

But it was a vain hope, and the only result of my journey to this place was the assurance I received that the gentleman had spent the entire evening preceding his death in his own room, where he had been brought several letters and one small package, the latter coming by mail. With this one point gained--if it was a point--I went back to New York.

Calling on Mrs. Holmes, I asked her if, while her husband was away, she

had sent him anything besides letters, and upon her replying to the contrary, requested to know if in her visit to Philadelphia she had noted among her husband's effects anything that was new or unfamiliar to her. "For he received a package while there," I explained, "and though its contents may have been perfectly harmless, it is just as well for us to be assured of this before going any further."

"Oh, you think, then, he was really the victim of some secret violence."

"We have no proof of it," I said. "On the contrary, we are assured that he died from natural causes. But the incident of the newspaper slip outweighs, in my mind, the doctor's conclusions, and until the mystery surrounding that obituary notice has been satisfactorily explained by its author I shall hold to the theory that your husband has been made away with in some strange and seemingly unaccountable manner, which it is our duty to bring to light."

"You are right! You are right! Oh, John Graham!"

She was so carried away by this plain expression of my belief that she forgot the question I had put to her.

"You have not said whether or not you found anything among your husband's effects that can explain this mystery," I suggested.

She at once became attentive.

"Nothing," said she; "his trunks were already packed and his bag nearly so. There were a few things lying about the room which I saw thrust into the latter. Would you like to look through them? I have not had the heart to open the bag since I came back."

As this was exactly what I wished, I said as much, and she led me into a small room, against the wall of which stood a trunk with a travelling-bag on top of it. Opening the latter, she spread the contents out on the trunk.

"I know all these things," she sadly murmured, the tears welling in her eyes.

"This?" I inquired, lifting up a bit of coiled wire with two or three rings dangling from it.

"No; why, what is that?"

"It looks like a puzzle of some kind."

"Then it is of no consequence. My husband was forever amusing himself over some such contrivance. All his friends knew how well he liked these toys and frequently sent them to him. This one evidently reached him from Philadelphia."

Meanwhile I was eyeing the bit of wire curiously. It was undoubtedly a puzzle, but it had appendages to it that I did not understand.

"It is more than ordinarily complicated," I observed, moving the rings up and down in a vain endeavour to work them off.

"The better he would like it," she said.

I kept working with the rings. Suddenly I gave a painful start. A little prong in the handle of the toy had started out and pierced me.

"You had better not handle it," said I, and laid it down. But the next moment I took it up again and put it in my pocket. The prick made by this treacherous bit of mechanism was in or near the same place on my thumb as the one I had noticed on the hand of the deceased Mr. Holmes.

There was a fire in the room, and before proceeding further I cauterised that prick with the end of a red-hot poker. Then I made my adieux to Mrs. Holmes and went immediately to a chemist friend of mine.

"Test the end of this bit of steel for me," said I. "I have reason to believe it carries with it a deadly poison."

He took the toy, promising to subject it to every test possible and let me know the result. Then I went home. I felt ill, or imagined I did, which under the circumstances was almost as bad.

Next day, however, I was quite well, with the exception of a certain inconvenience in my thumb. But not till the following week did I receive the chemist's report. It overthrew my whole theory. He found nothing, and returned me the bit of steel.

But I was not convinced.

"I will hunt up this John Graham," thought I, "and study him."

But this was not so easy a task as it may appear. As Mrs. Holmes possessed no clue to the whereabouts of her quondam lover, I had nothing

to aid me in my search for him, save her rather vague description of his personal appearance and the fact that he was constantly interrupted in speaking by a low, choking cough. However, my natural perseverance carried me through. After seeing and interviewing a dozen John Grahams without result, I at last lit upon a man of that name who presented a figure of such vivid unrest and showed such a desperate hatred of his fellows, that I began to entertain hopes of his being the person I was in search of. But determined to be sure of this before proceeding further, I confided my suspicions to Mrs. Holmes, and induced her to accompany me down to a certain spot on the "Elevated" from which I had more than once seen this man go by to his usual lounging place in Printing House Square.

She showed great courage in doing this, for she had such a dread of him that she was in a state of nervous excitement from the moment she left her house, feeling sure that she would attract his attention and thus risk a disagreeable encounter. But she might have spared herself these fears. He did not even glance up in passing us, and it was mainly by his walk she recognised him. But she did recognise him; and this nerved me at once to set about the formidable task of fixing upon him a crime which was not even admitted as a fact by the authorities.

He was a man-about-town, living, to all appearances, by his wits. He was to be seen mostly in the downtown portions of the city, standing for hours in front of some newspaper office, gnawing at his finger-ends, and staring at the passers-by with a hungry look alarming to the timid and provoking alms from the benevolent. Needless to say that he rejected the latter expression of sympathy with angry contempt.

His face was long and pallid, his cheek-bones high, and his mouth bitter and resolute in expression. He wore neither beard nor moustache, but made up for their lack by an abundance of light-brown hair, which hung very nearly to his shoulders. He stooped in standing, but as soon as he moved, showed decision and a certain sort of pride which caused him to hold his head high and his body more than usually erect. With all these good points his appearance was decidedly sinister, and I did not wonder that Mrs. Holmes feared him.

My next move was to accost him. Pausing before the doorway in which he stood, I addressed him some trivial question. He answered me with sufficient politeness, but with a grudging attention which betrayed the hold which his own thoughts had upon him. He coughed while speaking, and his eye, which for a moment rested on mine, produced an impression upon me for which I was hardly prepared, great as was my prejudice against him. There was such an icy composure in it; the composure of an

envenomed nature conscious of its superiority to all surprises. As I lingered to study him more closely, the many dangerous qualities of the man became more and more apparent to me; and convinced that to proceed further without deep and careful thought would be to court failure where triumph would set me up for life, I gave up all present attempt at enlisting him in conversation and went away in an inquiring and serious mood.

In fact, my position was a peculiar one, and the problem I had set for myself one of unusual difficulty. Only by means of some extraordinary device such as is seldom resorted to by the police of this or any other nation, could I hope to arrive at the secret of this man's conduct, and triumph in a matter which to all appearance was beyond human penetration.

But what device? I knew of none, nor through two days and nights of strenuous thought did I receive the least light on the subject. Indeed, my mind seemed to grow more and more confused the more I urged it into action. I failed to get inspiration indoors or out; and feeling my health suffer from the constant irritation of my recurring disappointment, I resolved to take a day off and carry myself and my perplexities into the country.

I did so. Governed by an impulse which I did not then understand, I went to a small town in New Jersey and entered the first house on which I saw the sign "Room to Let." The result was most fortunate. No sooner had I crossed the threshold of the neat and homely apartment thrown open to my use, than it recalled a room in which I had slept two years before and in which I had read a little book I was only too glad to remember at this moment. Indeed, it seemed as if a veritable inspiration had come to me through this recollection, for though the tale to which I allude was a simple child's story written for moral purposes, it contained an idea which promised to be invaluable to me at this juncture. Indeed, by means of it, I believed myself to have solved the problem that was puzzling me, and, relieved beyond expression, I paid for the night's lodging I had now determined to forego, and returned immediately to New York, having spent just fifteen minutes in the town where I had received this happy inspiration.

My first step on entering the city was to order a dozen steel coils made similar to the one which I still believed answerable for James Holmes's death. My next to learn as far as possible all of John Graham's haunts and habits. At a week's end I had the springs and knew almost as well as he did himself where he was likely to be found at all times of the day and night. I immediately acted upon this knowledge. Assuming a slight

disguise, I repeated my former stroll through Printing House Square, looking into each doorway as I passed. John Graham was in one of them, staring in his old way at the passing crowd, but evidently seeing nothing but the images formed by his own disordered brain. A manuscript roll stuck out of his breast-pocket, and from the way his nervous fingers fumbled with it, I began to understand the restless glitter of his eyes, which were as full of wretchedness as any eyes I have ever seen.

Entering the doorway where he stood, I dropped at his feet one of the small steel coils with which I was provided. He did not see it. Stopping near him, I directed his attention to it by saying:

"Pardon me, but did I not see something drop out of your hand?"

He started, glanced at the seemingly inoffensive toy I had pointed out, and altered so suddenly and so vividly that it became instantly apparent that the surprise I had planned for him was fully as keen and searching as one as I had anticipated. Recoiling sharply, he gave me a quick look, then glanced down again at his feet as if half expecting to find the object of his terror gone. But, perceiving it still lying there, he crushed it viciously with his heel, and uttering some incoherent words dashed impetuously from the building.

Confident that he would regret this hasty impulse and return, I withdrew a few steps and waited. And sure enough, in less than five minutes, he came slinking back. Picking up the coil with more than one sly look about, he examined it closely. Suddenly he gave a sharp cry and went staggering out. Had he discovered that the seeming puzzle possessed the same invisible spring which had made the one handled by James Holmes so dangerous?

Certain as to the place he would be found next, I made a short cut to an obscure little saloon in Nassau Street, where I took up my stand in a spot convenient for seeing without being seen. In ten minutes he was standing at the bar asking for a drink.

"Whiskey!" he cried. "Straight."

It was given him, but as he set the empty glass down on the counter he saw lying before him another of the steel springs, and was so confounded by the sight that the proprietor, who had put it there at my instigation, thrust out his hand toward him as if half afraid he would fall.

"Where did that--that _thing_ come from?" stammered John Graham, ignoring the other's gesture and pointing with a trembling hand at the insignificant bit of wire between them.

"Didn't it drop from your coat-pocket?" inquired the proprietor. "It wasn't lying here before you came in."

With a horrible oath the unhappy man turned and fled from the place. I lost sight of him after that for three hours, then I suddenly came upon him again. He was walking uptown with a set purpose in his face that made him look more dangerous than ever. Of course I followed him, expecting him to turn towards Fifty-ninth Street, but at the corner of Madison Avenue and Forty-seventh Street he changed his mind and dashed toward Third Avenue. At Park Avenue he faltered and again turned north, walking for several blocks as if the fiends were behind him. I began to think that he was but attempting to walk off his excitement, when, at a sudden rushing sound in the cut beside us, he stopped and trembled. An express train was shooting by. As it disappeared in the tunnel beyond, he looked about him with a blanched face and wandering eye; but his glance did not turn my way, or, if it did, he failed to attach any meaning to my near presence.

He began to move on again and this time towards the bridge spanning the cut. I followed him very closely. In the centre of it he paused and looked down at the track beneath him. Another train was approaching. As it came near he trembled from head to foot, and, catching at the railing against which he leaned, was about to make a quick move forward when a puff of smoke arose from below and sent him staggering backward, gasping with a terror I could hardly understand till I saw that the smoke had taken the form of a spiral and was sailing away before him in what to his disordered imagination must have looked like a gigantic image of the coil with which twice before on this day he had found himself confronted.

It may have been chance and it may have been providence; but whichever it was it saved him. He could not face that semblance of his haunting thought; and turning away he cowered down on the neighbouring curbstone, where he sat for several minutes, with his head buried in his hands; when he arose again he was his own daring and sinister self. Knowing that he was now too much master of his faculties to ignore me any longer, I walked quickly away and left him. I knew where he would be at six o'clock and had already engaged a table at the same restaurant. It was seven, however, before he put in an appearance, and by this time he was looking more composed. There was a reckless air about him, however, which was perhaps only noticeable to me; for none of the habitués of

this especial restaurant were entirely without it; wild eyes and unkempt hair being in the majority.

I let him eat. The dinner he ordered was simple and I had not the heart to interrupt his enjoyment of it.

But when he had finished and came to pay, then I allowed the shock to come. Under the bill which the waiter laid at the side of his plate was the inevitable steel coil; and it produced even more than its usual effect. I own I felt sorry for him.

He did not dash from the place, however, as he had from the liquor saloon. A spirit of resistance had seized him and he demanded to know where this object of his fear had come from. No one could tell him (or would). Whereupon he began to rave and would certainly have done himself or somebody else an injury if he had not been calmed by a man almost as wild-looking as himself. Paying his bill, but vowing he would never enter the place again, he went out, clay white, but with the swaggering air of a man who had just asserted himself.

He drooped, however, as soon as he reached the street, and I had no difficulty in following him to a certain gambling den, where he gained three dollars and lost five. From there he went to his lodgings in West Tenth Street.

I did not follow him. He had passed through many deep and wearing emotions since noon, and I had not the heart to add another to them.

But late the next day I returned to this house and rang the bell. It was already dusk, but there was light enough for me to notice the unrepai red condition of the iron railings on either side of the old stoop and to compare this abode of decayed grandeur with the spacious and elegant apartment in which pretty Mrs. Holmes mourned the loss of her young husband. Had any such comparison ever been made by the unhappy John Graham, as he hurried up these battered steps into the dismal halls beyond?

In answer to my summons there came to the door a young woman to whom I had but to intimate my wish to see Mr. Graham for her to let me in with the short announcement:

"Top floor, back room! Door open, he's out; door shut, he's in."

As an open door meant liberty to enter, I lost no time in following the direction of her finger, and presently found myself in a low attic

chamber overlooking an acre of roofs. A fire had been lighted in the open grate, and the flickering red beams danced on ceiling and walls with a cheeriness greatly in contrast to the nature of the business which had led me there. As they also served to light the room, I proceeded to make myself at home; and drawing up a chair, sat down at the fireplace in such a way as to conceal myself from any one entering the door.

In less than half an hour he came in.

He was in a state of high emotion. His face was flushed and his eyes burning. Stepping rapidly forward, he flung his hat on the table in the middle of the room, with a curse that was half cry and half groan. Then he stood silent and I had an opportunity of noting how haggard he had grown in the short time which had elapsed since I had seen him last. But the interval of his inaction was short, and in a moment he flung up his arms with a loud "Curse her!" that rang through the narrow room and betrayed the source of his present frenzy. Then he again stood still, grating his teeth and working his hands in a way terribly suggestive of the murderer's instinct. But not for long. He saw something that attracted his attention on the table, a something upon which my eyes had long before been fixed, and starting forward with a fresh and quite different display of emotion, he caught up what looked like a roll of manuscript and began to tear it open.

"Back again! Always back!" wailed from his lips; and he gave the roll a toss that sent from its midst a small object which he no sooner saw than he became speechless and reeled back. It was another of the steel coils.

"Good God!" fell at last from his stiff and working lips. "Am I mad or has the devil joined in the pursuit against me? I cannot eat, I cannot drink, but this diabolical spring starts up before me. It is here, there, everywhere. The visible sign of my guilt; the--the----" He had stumbled back upon my chair, and turning, saw me.

I was on my feet at once, and noting that he was dazed by the shock of my presence, I slid quietly between him and the door.

The movement roused him. Turning upon me with a sarcastic smile in which was concentrated the bitterness of years, he briefly said:

"So I am caught! Well, there has to be an end to men as well as to things, and I am ready for mine. She turned me away from her door to-day, and after the hell of that moment I don't much fear any other."

"You had better not talk," I admonished him. "All that falls from you now will only tell against you on your trial."

He broke into a harsh laugh. "And do you think I care for that? That having been driven by a woman's perfidy into crime I am going to bridle my tongue and keep down the words which are my only safeguard from insanity? No, no; while my miserable breath lasts I will curse her, and if the halter is to cut short my words, it shall be with her name blistering my lips."

I attempted to speak, but he would not give me an opportunity. The passion of weeks had found vent and he rushed on recklessly:

"I went to her house to-day. I wanted to see her in her widow's weeds; I wanted to see her eyes red with weeping over a grief which owed its bitterness to me. But she would not grant me admittance. She had me thrust from her door, and I shall never know how deeply the iron has sunk into her soul. But"--and here his face showed a sudden change--"I shall see her if I am tried for murder. She will be in the courtroom--on the witness stand----"

"Doubtless," I interjected; but his interruption came quickly and with vehement passion.

"Then I am ready. Welcome trial, conviction, death, even. To confront her eye to eye is all I wish. She shall never forget it, never!"

"Then you do not deny----" I began.

"I deny nothing," he returned, and held out his hands with a grim gesture. "How can I, when there falls from everything I touch the devilish thing which took away the life I hated?"

"Have you anything more to say or do before you leave these rooms?" I asked.

He shook his head, and then, bethinking himself, pointed to the roll of paper which he had flung on the table.

"Burn that!" he cried.

I took up the roll and looked at it. It was the manuscript of a poem in blank verse.

"I have been with it into a dozen newspaper and magazine offices," he explained with great bitterness. "Had I succeeded in getting a publisher for it I might have forgotten my wrongs and tried to build up a new life on the ruins of the old. But they would not have it, none of them; so I say, burn it! that no memory of me may remain in this miserable world."

"Keep to the facts!" I severely retorted. "It was while carrying this poem from one newspaper to another that you secured that bit of print upon the blank side of which yourself printed the obituary notice with which you savoured your revenge upon the woman who had disappointed you."

"You know that? Then you know where I got the poison with which I tipped the silly toy with which that weak man fooled away his life?"

"No," said I, "I do not know where you got it. I merely know it was no common poison bought at a druggist's, or from any ordinary chemist."

"It was woorali; the deadly, secret woorali. I got it from--but that is another man's secret. You will never hear from me anything that will compromise a friend. I got it, that is all. One drop, but it killed my man."

The satisfaction, the delight, which he threw into these words are beyond description. As they left his lips a jet of flame from the neglected fire shot up and threw his figure for one instant into bold relief upon the lowering ceiling; then it died out, and nothing but the twilight dusk remained in the room and on the countenance of this doomed and despairing man.

THE DUST OF DEATH.

The Story of the Great Plague of the Twentieth Century.

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *The Doom of London*, by Frederick Merrick White

The front door bell tinkled impatiently; evidently somebody was in a hurry. Alan Hubert answered the call, a thing that even a distinguished physician might do, seeing that it was on the stroke of midnight. The tall, graceful figure of a woman in evening dress stumbled into the hall. The diamonds in her hair shimmered and trembled, her face was full of terror.

"You are Dr. Hubert," she gasped. "I am Mrs. Fillingham, the artist's wife, you know. Will you come with me at once.... My husband.... I had been dining out. In the studio.... Oh, please come!"

Hubert asked no unnecessary questions. He knew Fillingham, the great portrait painter, well enough by repute and by sight also, for Fillingham's house and studio were close by. There were many artists in the Devonshire Park district--that pretty suburb which was one of the triumphs of the builder's and landscape gardener's art. Ten years ago it had been no more than a swamp; to-day people spoke complacently of the fact that they lived in Devonshire Park.

Hubert walked up the drive and past the trim lawns with Mrs. Fillingham hanging on his arm, and in at the front door. Mrs. Fillingham pointed to a door on the right. She was too exhausted to speak. There were shaded lights gleaming everywhere, on old oak and armour and on a large portrait of a military-looking man propped up on an easel. On a lay figure was a magnificent foreign military uniform.

Hubert caught all this in a quick mental flash. But the vital interest to him was a human figure lying on his back before the fireplace. The clean-shaven, sensitive face of the artist had a ghastly, purple-black tinge, there was a large swelling in the throat.

"He--he is not dead?" Mrs. Fillingham asked in a frozen whisper.

Hubert was able to satisfy the distracted wife on that head. Fillingham was still breathing. Hubert stripped the shade from a reading lamp and held the electric bulb at the end of its long flex above the sufferer's mouth, contriving to throw the flood of light upon the back of the throat.

[Illustration: "Diphtheria!" he exclaimed.]

"Diphtheria!" he exclaimed. "Label's type unless I am greatly mistaken. Some authorities are disposed to scoff at Dr. Label's discovery. I was an assistant of his for four years and I know better. Fortunately I happen to know what the treatment--successful in two cases--was."

He hurried from the house and returned a few minutes later breathlessly. He had some strange-looking, needle-like instruments in his hands. He took an electric lamp from its socket and substituted a plug on a flex instead. Then he cleared a table without ceremony and managed to hoist his patient upon it.

"Now please hold that lamp steadily thus," he said. "Bravo, you are a born nurse! I am going to apply these electric needles to the throat."

Hubert talked on more for the sake of his companion's nerves than anything else. The still figure on the table quivered under his touch, his lungs expanded in a long, shuddering sigh. The heart was beating more or less regularly now. Fillingham opened his eyes and muttered something.

"Ice," Hubert snapped, "have you got any ice in the house?"

It was a well-regulated establishment and there was plenty of ice in the refrigerator. Not until the patient was safe in bed did Hubert's features relax.

"We'll pull him through yet," he said. "I'll send you a competent nurse round in half-an-hour. I'll call first thing in the morning and bring Dr. Label with me. He must not miss this on any account."

Half-an-hour later Hubert was spinning along in a hansom towards Harley Street. It was past one when he reached the house of the great German savant. A dim light was burning in the hall. A big man with an enormous shaggy head and a huge frame attired in the seediest of dress coats welcomed Hubert with a smile.

"So, my young friend," Label said, "your face promises excitement."

"Case of Label's diphtheria," Hubert said crisply. "Fillingham, the artist, who lives close by me. Fortunately they called me in. I have arranged for you to see my patient the first thing in the morning."

The big German's jocular manner vanished. He led Hubert gravely to a chair in his consulting-room and curtly demanded details. He smiled approvingly as Hubert enlarged upon his treatment of the case.

"Undoubtedly your diagnosis was correct," he said, puffing furiously at a long china pipe. "You have not forgotten what I told you of it. The swelling--which is caused by violent blood poisoning--yielded to the electric treatment. I took the virus from the cases in the north and I tried them on scores of animals. And they all died.

"I find it is the virus of what is practically a new disease, one of the worst in the wide world. I say it recurs again, and it does. So I practise, and practise to find a cure. And electricity is the cure.

I inoculate five dogs with the virus and I save two by the electric current. You follow my plans and you go the first stage of the way to cure Fillingham. Did you bring any of that mucous here?"

Hubert produced it in a tiny glass tube. For a little time Label examined it under his microscope. He wanted to make assurance doubly sure.

"It is the same thing," he said presently. "I knew that it was bound to recur again. Why, it is planted all over our big cities. And electricity is the only way to get rid of it. It was the best method of dealing with sewage, only corporations found it too expensive. Wires in the earth charged to say 10,000 volts. Apply this and you destroy the virus that lies buried under hundreds of houses in London. They laughed at me when I suggested it years ago."

"Underground," Hubert asked vaguely.

"Ach, underground, yes. Don't you recollect that in certain parts of England cancer is more common than in other places? The germs have been turned up in fields. I, myself, have proved their existence. In a little time, perhaps, I shall open the eyes of your complacent Londoners. You live in a paradise, ach Gott! And what was that paradise like ten years ago? Dreary pools and deserted brickfields. And how do you fill it up and level it to build houses upon?"

"By the carting of hundreds of thousands of loads of refuse, of course."

"Ach, I will presently show you what that refuse was and is. Now go home to bed."

* * * * *

Mrs. Fillingham remained in the studio with Hubert whilst Label was making his examination overhead. The patient had had a bad night; his symptoms were very grave indeed. Hubert listened more or less vaguely; his mind had gone beyond the solitary case. He was dreading what might happen in the future.

"Your husband has a fine constitution," he said soothingly.

"He has overtried it lately," Mrs. Fillingham replied. "At present he is painting a portrait of the Emperor of Asturia. His Majesty was to have sat to-day; he spent the morning here yesterday."

But Hubert was paying no attention.

The heavy tread of Label was heard as he floundered down the stairs. His big voice was booming. What mattered all the portraits in the world so long as the verdict hung on the German doctor's lips!

"Oh, there is a chance," Label exclaimed. "Just a chance. Everything possible is being done. This is not so much diphtheria as a new disease. Diphtheria family, no doubt, but the blood poisoning makes a difficult thing of it."

Label presently dragged Hubert away after parting with Mrs. Fillingham. He wanted to find a spot where building or draining was going on.

They found some men presently engaged in connecting a new house with the main drainage--a deep cutting some forty yards long by seven or eight feet deep. There was the usual crust of asphalt on the road, followed by broken bricks and the like, and a more or less regular stratum of blue-black rubbish, soft, wet, and clinging, and emitting an odour that caused Hubert to throw up his head.

"You must have broken into a drain somewhere here," he said.

"We ain't, sir," the foreman of the gang replied. "It's nout but rubbidge as they made up the road with here ten years ago. Lord knows where it came from, but it do smell fearful in weather like this."

The odour indeed was stifling. All imaginable kinds of rubbish and refuse lay under the external beauties of Devonshire Park in strata ranging from five to forty feet deep. It was little wonder that trees and flowers flourished here. And here--wet, and dark, and festering--was a veritable hotbed of disease. Contaminated rags, torn paper, road siftings, decayed vegetable matter, diseased food, fish and bones all were represented here.

"Every ounce of this ought to have gone through the destructor," Label snorted. "But no, it is used for the foundations of a suburban paradise. My word, we shall see what your paradise will be like presently. Come along."

Label picked up a square slab of the blue stratum, put it in a tin, and the tin in his pocket. He was snorting and puffing with contempt.

[Illustration: Label picked up a square slab of the blue strata, put it in a tin, and the tin in his pocket.]

"Now come to Harley Street with me and I will show you things," he said.

He was as good as his word. Placed under a microscope, a minute portion of the subsoil from Devonshire Park proved to be a mass of living matter. There were at least four kinds of bacillus here that Hubert had never seen before. With his superior knowledge Label pointed out the fact that they all existed in the mucous taken from Fillingham on the previous evening.

"There you are!" he cried excitedly. "You get all that wet sodden refuse of London and you dump it down here in a heap. You mix with it a heap of vegetable matter so that fermentation shall have every chance. Then you cover it over with some soil, and you let it boil, boil, boil. Then, when millions upon millions of death-dealing microbes are bred and bred till their virility is beyond the scope of science, you build good houses on the top of it. For years I have been prophesying an outbreak of some new disease--or some awful form of an old one--and here it comes. They called me a crank because I asked for high electric voltage to kill the plague--to destroy it by lightning. A couple of high tension wires run into the earth and there you are. See here."

He took his cube of the reeking earth and applied the battery to it. The mass showed no outward change. But once under the microscope a fragment of it demonstrated that there was not the slightest trace of organic life.

"There!" Label cried. "Behold the remedy. I don't claim that it will cure in every case, because we hardly touch the diphtheretic side of the trouble. When there has been a large loss of life we shall learn the perfect remedy by experience. But this thing is coming, and your London is going to get a pretty bad scare. You have laid it down like port wine, and now that the thing is ripe you are going to suffer from the consequence. I have written articles in the *_Lancet_*, I have warned people, but they take not the slightest heed."

Hubert went back home thoughtfully. He found the nurse who had Fillingham's case in hand waiting for him in his consulting-room.

"I am just back from my walk," she said. "I wish you would call at Dr. Walker's at Elm Crescent. He has two cases exactly like Mr. Fillingham's, and he is utterly puzzled."

Hubert snatched his hat and his electric needles, and hurried away at once. He found his colleague impatiently waiting for him. There

were two children this time in one of the best appointed houses in Devonshire Park, suffering precisely as Fillingham had done. In each instance the electric treatment gave the desired result. Hubert hastily explained the whole matter to Walker.

"It's an awful business," the latter said. "Personally, I have a great respect for Label, and I feel convinced that he is right. If this thing spreads, property in Devonshire Park won't be worth the price of slum lodgings."

By midday nineteen cases of the so-called diphtheria had been notified within the three miles area known as Devonshire Park. Evidently some recent excavations had liberated the deadly microbe. But there was no scare as yet. Label came down again hot-foot with as many assistants as he could get, and took up his quarters with Hubert. They were going to have a busy time.

It was after two before Hubert managed to run across to Fillingham's again. He stood in the studio waiting for Mrs. Fillingham. His mind was preoccupied and uneasy, yet he seemed to miss something from the studio. It was strange, considering that he had only been in the room twice before.

"Are you looking for anything?" Mrs. Fillingham asked.

"I don't know," Hubert exclaimed. "I seem to miss something. I've got it--the absence of the uniform."

"They sent for it," Mrs. Fillingham said vaguely. She was dazed for want of sleep. "The Emperor had to go to some function, and that was the only uniform of the kind he happened to have. He was to have gone away in it after his sitting to-day. My husband persuaded him to leave it when it was here yesterday, and----"

Hubert had cried out suddenly as if in pain.

"He was here yesterday--here, with your husband, and your husband with the diphtheria on him?"

Then the weary wife understood.

"Good heavens----"

But Hubert was already out of the room. He blundered on until he came to a hansom cab creeping along in the sunshine.

"Buckingham Palace," he gasped. "Drive like mad. A five-pound note for you if you get me there by three o'clock!"

* * * * *

Already Devonshire Park was beginning to be talked about. It was wonderful how the daily press got to the root of things. Hubert caught sight of more than one contents bill as he drove home that alluded to the strange epidemic.

Dr. Label joined Hubert presently in Mrs. Fillingham's home, rubbing his huge hands together. He knew nothing of the new dramatic developments. He asked where Hubert had been spending his time.

"Trying to save the life of your friend, the Emperor of Asturia," Hubert said. "He was here yesterday with Fillingham, and, though he seems well enough at present, he may have the disease on him now. What do you think of that?"

Hubert waited to see the great man stagger before the blow. Label smiled and nodded as he proceeded to light a cigarette.

"Good job too," he said. "I am honorary physician to the Court of Asturia. I go back, there, as you know, when I finish my great work here. The Emperor I have brought through four or five illnesses, and if anything is wrong he always sends for me."

"But he might get the awful form of diphtheria!"

"Very likely," Label said coolly. "All these things are in the hands of Providence. I know that man's constitution to a hair, and if he gets the disease I shall pull him through for certain. I should like him to have it."

"In the name of all that is practical, why?"

"To startle the public," Label cried. He was mounted on his hobby now. He paced up and down the room in a whirl of tobacco smoke. "It would bring the matter home to everybody. Then perhaps something will be done. I preach and preach in vain. Only the Lancet backs me up at all. Many times I have asked for a quarter of a million of money, so that I can found a school for the electrical treatment of germ diseases. I want to destroy all malaria. All dirt in bulk, every bit of refuse that is likely to breed fever and the like, should be treated by

electricity. I would take huge masses of deadly scourge and mountains of garbage, and render them innocent by the electric current. But no; that costs money, and your poverty-stricken Government cannot afford it. Given a current of 10,000 volts a year or two ago, and I could have rendered this one of the healthiest places in England. You only wanted to run those high voltage wires into the earth here and there, and behold the millions are slain, wiped out, gone for ever. Perhaps I will get it _now_."

* * * * *

London was beginning to get uneasy. There had been outbreaks before, but they were of the normal type. People, for instance, are not so frightened of smallpox as they used to be. Modern science has learnt to grapple with the fell disease and rob it of half its terrors. But this new and virulent form of diphtheria was another matter.

Hubert sat over his dinner that night, making mental calculations. There were nearly a thousand houses of varying sizes in Devonshire Park. Would it be necessary to abandon these? He took down a large scale map of London, and hastily marked in blue pencil those areas which had developed rapidly of recent years. In nearly all of these a vast amount of artificial ground had been necessary. Hubert was appalled as he calculated the number of jerry-built erections in these districts.

A servant came in and laid _The Evening Wire_ upon the table. Hubert glanced at it. Nothing had been lost in the way of sensation. The story of the Emperor's visit to the district had been given great prominence. An inquiry at Buckingham Palace had elicited the fact that the story was true.

Well, perhaps no harm would come of it. Hubert finished a cigar and prepared to go out. As he flung the paper aside a paragraph in the stop press column--a solitary paragraph like an inky island in a sea of white--caught his eye.

"No alarm need be experienced as to the danger encountered by the Emperor of Asturia, but we are informed that His Majesty is prevented from dining at Marlborough House to-night owing to a slight cold and sore throat caught, it is stated, in the draughts at Charing Cross Station. The Emperor will go down to Cowes as arranged to-morrow."

Hubert shook his head doubtfully. The slight cold and sore throat were ominous. His mind dwelt upon the shadow of trouble as he made his way

to the hospital. There had been two fresh cases during the evening and the medical staff were looking anxious and worried. They wanted assistance badly, and Hubert gave his to the full.

It was nearly eleven before Hubert staggered home. In the main business street of the suburb a news-shop was still open.

A flaming placard attracted the doctor's attention. It struck him like a blow.

"Alarming illness of the Asturian Emperor. His Majesty stricken down by the new disease. Latest bulletin from Buckingham Palace."

Almost mechanically Hubert bought a paper. There was not much beyond the curt information that the Emperor was dangerously ill.

Arrived home Hubert found a telegram awaiting him. He tore it open. The message was brief but to the point.

"Have been called in to Buckingham Palace, Label's diphtheria certain. Shall try and see you to-morrow morning. Label."

London was touched deeply and sincerely. A great sovereign had come over here in the most friendly fashion to show his good feeling for a kindred race. On the very start of a round of pleasure he had been stricken down like this.

The public knew all the details from the progress of that fateful uniform to the thrilling eight o'clock bulletin when the life of Rudolph III. was declared to be in great danger. They knew that Dr. Label had been sent for post haste. The big German was no longer looked upon as a clever crank, but the one man who might be able to save London from a terrible scourge. And from lip to lip went the news that over two hundred cases of the new disease had now broken out in Devonshire Park.

People knew pretty well what it was and what was the cause now. Label's warning had come home with a force that nobody had expected. He had stolen away quite late for half-an-hour to his own house and there had been quite free with the pressmen. He extenuated nothing. The thing was bad, and it was going to be worse. So far as he could see, something of this kind was inevitable. If Londoners were so blind as to build houses on teeming heaps of filth, why, London must be prepared to take the consequences.

Hubert knew nothing of this. He had fallen back utterly exhausted in his chair with the idea of taking a short rest--for nearly three hours he had been fast asleep. Somebody was shaking him roughly. He struggled back to the consciousness that Label was bending over him.

"Well, you are a nice fellow," the German grumbled.

"I was dead beat and worn out," Hubert said apologetically. "How is the Emperor?"

"His Majesty is doing as well as I can expect. It is a very bad case, however. I have left him in competent hands, so that I could run down here. They were asking for you at the hospital, presuming that you were busy somewhere. The place is full, and so are four houses in the nearest terrace."

"Spreading like that?" Hubert exclaimed.

"Spreading like that! By this time to-morrow we shall have a thousand cases on our hands. The authorities are doing everything they can to help us, fresh doctors and nurses and stores are coming in all the time."

"You turn people out of their houses to make way then?"

Label smiled grimly. He laid his hand on Hubert's shoulder, and piloted him into the roadway. The place seemed to be alive with cabs and vehicles of all kinds. It was as if all the inhabitants of Devonshire Park were going away for their summer holidays simultaneously. The electric arcs shone down on white and frightened faces where joyous gaiety should have been. Here and there a child slept peacefully, but on the whole it was a sorry exodus.

[Illustration: It was if all the inhabitants of Devonshire Park were going away for their summer holidays simultaneously.]

"There you are," Label said grimly. "It is a night flight from the plague. It has been going on for hours. It would have been finished now but for the difficulty in getting conveyances. Most of the cabmen are avoiding the place as if it were accursed. But money can command everything, hence the scene that you see before you."

Hubert stood silently watching the procession. There was very little luggage on any of the cabs or conveyances. Families were going wholesale. Devonshire Park for the most part was an exceedingly

prosperous district, so that the difficulties of emigration were not great. In their panic the people were abandoning everything in the wild flight for life and safety.

Then he went in again to rest before the unknown labours of to-morrow. Next morning he anxiously opened his morning paper.

It was not particularly pleasant reading beyond the information that the health of the Emperor of Asturia was mentioned, and that he had passed a satisfactory night. As to the rest, the plague was spreading. There were two hundred and fifty cases in Devonshire Park. Label's sayings had come true at last; it was a fearful vindication of his prophecy. And the worst of it was that no man could possibly say where it was going to end.

* * * * *

Strange as it may seem, London's anxiety as to the welfare of one man blinded all to the great common danger. For the moment Devonshire Park was forgotten. The one centre of vivid interest was Buckingham Palace.

For three days crowds collected there until at length Label and his colleagues were in a position to issue a bulletin that gave something more than hope. The Emperor of Asturia was going to recover. Label was not the kind of man to say so unless he was pretty sure of his ground.

It was not till this fact had soaked itself into the public mind that attention was fully turned to the danger that threatened London. Devonshire Park was practically in quarantine. All those who could get away had done so, and those who had remained were confined to their own particular district, and provisioned on a system. The new plague was spreading fast.

In more than one quarter the suggestion was made that all houses in certain localities should be destroyed, and the ground thoroughly cleansed and disinfected. It would mean a loss of millions of money, but in the scare of the moment London cared nothing for that.

At the end of a week there were seven thousand cases of the new form of diphtheria under treatment. Over one thousand cases a day came in. Devonshire Park was practically deserted save for the poorer quarters, whence the victims came. It seemed strange to see fine houses abandoned to the first comer who had the hardihood to enter. Devonshire Park was a stricken kingdom within itself, and the Commune of terror reigned.

Enterprising journalists penetrated the barred area and wrote articles about it. One of the fraternity bolder than the rest passed a day and night in one of these deserted palatial residences, and gave his sensations to the Press. Within a few hours most of the villas were inhabited again! There were scores of men and women in the slums who have not the slightest fear of disease--they are too familiar with it for that--and they came creeping westward in search of shelter. The smiling paradise had become a kind of Tom Tiddler's ground, a huge estate in Chancery.

Nobody had troubled, the tenants were busy finding pure quarters elsewhere, the owners of the property were fighting public opinion to save what in many cases was their sole source of income. If Devonshire Park had to be razed to the ground many a wealthy man would be ruined.

It was nearly the end of the first week before this abnormal state of affairs was fully brought home to Hubert. He had been harassed and worried and worn by want of sleep, but tired as he was he did not fail to notice the number of poorer patients who dribbled regularly into the terrace of houses that now formed the hospital. There was something about them that suggested any district rather than Devonshire Park.

"What does it mean, Walker?" he asked one of his doctors.

Walker had just come in from his hour's exercise, heated and excited.

"It's a perfect scandal," he cried. "The police are fighting shy of us altogether. I've just been up to the station and they tell me it is a difficult matter to keep competent officers in the district. All along Frinton Hill and Eversley Gardens the houses are crowded with outcasts. They have drifted here from the East End and are making some of those splendid residences impossible."

Hubert struggled into his hat and coat, and went out. It was exactly as Walker had said. Here was a fine residence with stables and greenhouses and the like, actually occupied by Whitechapel at its worst. A group of dingy children played on the lawn, and a woman with the accumulated grime of weeks on her face was hanging something that passed for washing out of an upper window. The flower beds were trampled down, a couple of attenuated donkeys browsed on the lawn.

[Illustration: Here was a fine residence actually occupied by Whitechapel at its worst.]

Hubert strolled up to the house fuming. Two men were sprawling on a

couple of morocco chairs smoking filthy pipes. They looked up at the newcomer with languid curiosity. They appeared quite to appreciate the fact that they were absolutely masters of the situation.

"What are you doing here?" Hubert demanded.

"If you're the owner well and good," was the reply. "If not, you take an' 'look it. We know which side our bread's buttered."

There was nothing for it but to accept this philosophical suggestion. Hubert swallowed his rising indignation and departed. There were other evidences of the ragged invasion as he went down the road. Here and there a house was closed and the blinds down; but it was an exception rather than the rule.

Hubert walked away till he could find a cab, and was driven off to Scotland Yard in a state of indignation. The view of the matter rather startled the officials there.

"We have been so busy," the Chief Inspector said; "but the matter shall be attended to. Dr. Label was here yesterday, and at his suggestion we are having the whole force electrically treated--a kind of electrical hardening of the throat. The doctor claims that his recent treatment is as efficacious against the diphtheria as vaccination is against smallpox. It is in all the papers to-day. All London will be going mad over the new remedy to-morrow."

Hubert nodded thoughtfully. The electric treatment seemed the right thing. Label had shown him what an effect the application of the current had had on the teeming mass of matter taken from the road cutting. He thought it over until he fell asleep in his cab on the way back to his weary labours.

* * * * *

London raged for the new remedy. The electric treatment for throat troubles is no new thing. In this case it was simple and painless, and it had been guaranteed by one of the popular heroes of the hour. A week before Label had been regarded as a crank and a faddist; now people were ready to swear by him. Had he not prophesied this vile disease for years, and was he not the only man who had a remedy? And the Emperor of Asturia was mending rapidly.

Had Label bidden the people to stand on their heads for an hour a day as a sovereign specific they would have done so gladly. Every private

doctor and every public institution was worked to death. At the end of ten days practically all London had been treated. There was nothing for it now but to wait patiently for the result.

Another week passed and then suddenly the inrush of cases began to drop. The average at the end of the second week was down to eighty per day. On the seventeenth and eighteenth days there were only four cases altogether and in each instance they proved to be patients who had not submitted themselves to the treatment.

The scourge was over. Two days elapsed and there were no fresh cases whatever. Some time before a strong posse of police had swamped down upon Devonshire Park and cleared all the slum people out of their luxurious quarters. One or two of the bolder dwellers in that once favoured locality began to creep back. Now that they were inoculated there seemed little to fear.

But Label had something to say about that. He felt that he was free to act now, he had his royal patient practically off his hands. A strong Royal Commission had been appointed by Parliament to go at once thoroughly into the matter.

"And I am the first witness called," he chuckled to Hubert as the latter sat with the great German smoking a well-earned cigar. "I shall be able to tell a few things."

He shook his big head and smiled. The exertion of the last few weeks did not seem to have told upon him in the slightest.

"I also have been summoned," Hubert said. "But you don't suggest that those fine houses should be destroyed?"

"I don't suggest anything. I am going to confine myself to facts. One of your patent medicine advertisements says that electricity is life. Never was a truer word spoken. What has saved London from a great scourge? Electricity. What kills this new disease and renders it powerless? Electricity. And what is the great agent to fight dirt and filth with whenever it exists in great quantities? Always electricity. It has not been done before on the ground of expense, and look at the consequences! In one way and another it will cost London £2,000,000 to settle this matter. It was only a little over a third of that I asked for. Wait till you hear me talk!"

* * * * *

Naturally the greatest interest was taken in the early sittings of the Commission. A somewhat pompous chairman was prepared to exploit Label for his own gratification and self-glory. But the big German would have none of it. From the very first he dominated the Committee, he would give his evidence in his own way, he would speak of facts as he found them. And, after all, he was the only man there who had any practical knowledge of the subject of the inquiry.

"You would destroy the houses?" an interested member asked.

"Nothing of the kind," Label growled. "Not so much as a single pig-sty. If you ask me what electricity is I cannot tell you. It is a force in nature that as yet we don't understand. Originally it was employed as a destroyer of sewage, but it was abandoned as too expensive. You are the richest country in the world, and one of the most densely populated. Yet you are covering the land with jerry-built houses, the drainages of which will frequently want looking to. And your only way of discovering this is when a bad epidemic breaks out. Everything is too expensive. You will be a jerry-built people in a jerry-built empire. And your local authorities adopt some cheap system and then smile at the ratepayers and call for applause. Electricity will save all danger. It is dear at first, but it is far cheaper in the long run."

"If you will be so good as to get to the point," the chairman suggested.

Label smiled pityingly. He was like a schoolmaster addressing a form of little boys.

"The remedy is simple," he said. "I propose to have a couple of 10,000 volts wires discharging their current into the ground here and there over the affected area. Inoculation against the trouble is all very well, but it is not permanent and there is always danger whilst the source of it remains. I propose to remove the evil. Don't ask me what the process is, don't ask me what wonderful action takes place. All I know is that some marvellous agency gets to work and that a huge mound of live disease is rendered safe and innocent as pure water. And I want these things now, I don't want long sittings and reports and discussions. Let me work the cure and you can have all the talking and sittings you like afterwards."

Label got his own way, he would have got anything he liked at that moment. London was quiet and humble and in a mood to be generous.

* * * * *

Label stood over the cutting whence he had procured the original specimen of all the mischief. He was a little quiet and subdued, but his eyes shone and his hand was a trifle unsteady. His fingers trembled as he took up a fragment of the blue grey stratum and broke it up.

"Marvellous mystery," he cried. "We placed the wires in the earth and that great, silent, powerful servant has done the rest. Underground the current radiates, and, as it radiates, the source of the disease grows less and less until it ceases to be altogether. Only try this in the tainted areas of all towns and in a short time disease of all kinds would cease for ever."

"You are sure that stuff is wholesome, now?" Hubert asked.

"My future on it," Label cried. "Wait till we get it under the microscope. I am absolutely confident that I am correct."

And he was.

THE MEN IN THE STORM

The Project Gutenberg eBook, *The Open Boat and Other Stories*, by Stephen Crane

The blizzard began to swirl great clouds of snow along the streets, sweeping it down from the roofs, and up from the pavements, until the faces of pedestrians tingled and burned as from a thousand needle-prickings. Those on the walks huddled their necks closely in the collars of their coats, and went along stooping like a race of aged people. The drivers of vehicles hurried their horses furiously on their way. They were made more cruel by the exposure of their position, aloft on high seats. The street cars, bound up town, went slowly, the horses slipping and straining in the spongy brown mass that lay between the rails. The drivers, muffled to the eyes, stood erect, facing the wind, models of grim philosophy. Overhead trains rumbled and roared, and the dark structure of the elevated railroad, stretching over the avenue, dripped little streams and drops of water upon the mud and snow beneath.

All the clatter of the street was softened by the masses that lay upon the cobbles, until, even to one who looked from a window, it became important music, a melody of life made necessary to the ear by the dreariness of the pitiless beat and sweep of the storm. Occasionally one could see black figures of men busily shovelling the white drifts

from the walks. The sounds from their labour created new recollections of rural experiences which every man manages to have in a measure. Later, the immense windows of the shops became aglow with light, throwing great beams of orange and yellow upon the pavement. They were infinitely cheerful, yet in a way they accentuated the force and discomfort of the storm, and gave a meaning to the pace of the people and the vehicles, scores of pedestrians and drivers, wretched with cold faces, necks and feet, speeding for scores of unknown doors and entrances, scattering to an infinite variety of shelters, to places which the imagination made warm with the familiar colours of home.

There was an absolute expression of hot dinners in the pace of the people. If one dared to speculate upon the destination of those who came trooping, he lost himself in a maze of social calculation; he might fling a handful of sand and attempt to follow the flight of each particular grain. But as to the suggestion of hot dinners, he was in firm lines of thought, for it was upon every hurrying face. It is a matter of tradition; it is from the tales of childhood. It comes forth with every storm.

However, in a certain part of a dark west-side street, there was a collection of men to whom these things were as if they were not. In this street was located a charitable house, where for five cents the homeless of the city could get a bed at night, and in the morning coffee and bread.

During the afternoon of the storm, the whirling snows acted as drivers, as men with whips, and at half-past three the walk before the closed doors of the house was covered with wanderers of the street, waiting. For some distance on either side of the place they could be seen lurking in the doorways and behind projecting parts of buildings, gathering in close bunches in an effort to get warm. A covered wagon drawn up near the curb sheltered a dozen of them. Under the stairs that led to the elevated railway station, there were six or eight, their hands stuffed deep in their pockets, their shoulders stooped, jiggling their feet. Others always could be seen coming, a strange procession, some slouching along with the characteristic hopeless gait of professional strays, some coming with hesitating steps, wearing the air of men to whom this sort of thing was new.

It was an afternoon of incredible length. The snow, blowing in twisting clouds, sought out the men in their meagre hiding-places, and skilfully beat in among them, drenching their persons with showers of fine stinging flakes. They crowded together, muttering, and fumbling in their pockets to get their red inflamed wrists covered by the cloth.

New-comers usually halted at one end of the groups and addressed a question, perhaps much as a matter of form, "Is it open yet?"

Those who had been waiting inclined to take the questioner seriously and became contemptuous. "No; do yeh think we'd be standin' here?"

The gathering swelled in numbers steadily and persistently. One could always see them coming, trudging slowly through the storm.

Finally, the little snow plains in the street began to assume a leaden hue from the shadows of evening. The buildings upreared gloomily save where various windows became brilliant figures of light, that made shimmers and splashes of yellow on the snow. A street lamp on the curb struggled to illuminate, but it was reduced to impotent blindness by the swift gusts of sleet crusting its panes.

In this half-darkness, the men began to come from their shelter places and mass in front of the doors of charity. They were of all types, but the nationalities were mostly American, German, and Irish. Many were strong, healthy, clear-skinned fellows, with that stamp of countenance which is not frequently seen upon seekers after charity. There were men of undoubted patience, industry, and temperance, who, in time of ill-fortune, do not habitually turn to rail at the state of society, snarling at the arrogance of the rich, and bemoaning the cowardice of the poor, but who at these times are apt to wear a sudden and singular meekness, as if they saw the world's progress marching from them, and were trying to perceive where they had failed, what they had lacked, to be thus vanquished in the race. Then there were others of the shifting, Bowery element, who were used to paying ten cents for a place to sleep, but who now came here because it was cheaper.

But they were all mixed in one mass so thoroughly that one could not have discerned the different elements, but for the fact that the labouring men, for the most part, remained silent and impassive in the blizzard, their eyes fixed on the windows of the house, statues of patience.

The sidewalk soon became completely blocked by the bodies of the men. They pressed close to one another like sheep in a winter's gale, keeping one another warm by the heat of their bodies. The snow came down upon this compressed group of men until, directly from above, it might have appeared like a heap of snow-covered merchandise, if it were not for the fact that the crowd swayed gently with a unanimous, rhythmical motion. It was wonderful to see how the snow lay upon the

heads and shoulders of these men, in little ridges an inch thick perhaps in places, the flakes steadily adding drop and drop, precisely as they fall upon the unresisting grass of the fields. The feet of the men were all wet and cold, and the wish to warm them accounted for the slow, gentle, rhythmical motion. Occasionally some man whose ear or nose tingled acutely from the cold winds would wriggle down until his head was protected by the shoulders of his companions.

There was a continuous murmuring discussion as to the probability of the doors being speedily opened. They persistently lifted their eyes towards the windows. One could hear little combats of opinion.

"There's a light in th' winder!"

"Naw; it's a reflection f'm across th' way."

"Well, didn't I see 'em light it?"

"You did?"

"I did!"

"Well, then, that settles it!"

As the time approached when they expected to be allowed to enter, the men crowded to the doors in an unspeakable crush, jamming and wedging in a way that it seemed would crack bones. They surged heavily against the building in a powerful wave of pushing shoulders. Once a rumour flitted among all the tossing heads.

"They can't open th' door! Th' fellers er smack up agin 'em."

Then a dull roar of rage came from the men on the outskirts; but all the time they strained and pushed until it appeared to be impossible for those that they cried out against to do anything but be crushed into pulp.

"Ah, git away f'm th' door!"

"Git outa that!"

"Throw 'em out!"

"Kill 'em!"

"Say, fellers, now, what th' 'ell? G've 'em a chance t' open th' door!"

"Yeh dam pigs, give 'em a chance t' open th' door!"

Men in the outskirts of the crowd occasionally yelled when a boot-heel of one of trampling feet crushed on their freezing extremities.

"Git off me feet, yeh clumsy tarrier!"

"Say, don't stand on me feet! Walk on th' ground!"

A man near the doors suddenly shouted--"O-o-oh! Le' me out--le' me out!" And another, a man of infinite valour, once twisted his head so as to half face those who were pushing behind him. "Quit yer shovin', yeh"--and he delivered a volley of the most powerful and singular invective, straight into the faces of the men behind him. It was as if he was hammering the noses of them with curses of triple brass. His face, red with rage, could be seen upon it, an expression of sublime disregard of consequences. But nobody cared to reply to his imprecations; it was too cold. Many of them snickered, and all continued to push.

In occasional pauses of the crowd's movement the men had opportunities to make jokes; usually grim things, and no doubt very uncouth. Nevertheless, they were notable--one does not expect to find the quality of humour in a heap of old clothes under a snow-drift.

The winds seemed to grow fiercer as time wore on. Some of the gusts of snow that came down on the close collection of heads, cut like knives and needles, and the men huddled, and swore, not like dark assassins, but in a sort of American fashion, grimly and desperately, it is true, but yet with a wondrous under-effect, indefinable and mystic, as if there was some kind of humour in this catastrophe, in this situation in a night of snow-laden winds.

Once the window of the huge dry-goods shop across the street furnished material for a few moments of forgetfulness. In the brilliantly-lighted space appeared the figure of a man. He was rather stout and very well clothed. His beard was fashioned charmingly after that of the Prince of Wales. He stood in an attitude of magnificent reflection. He slowly stroked his moustache with a certain grandeur of manner, and looked down at the snow-encrusted mob. From below, there was denoted a supreme complacency in him. It seemed that the sight operated inversely, and enabled him to more clearly regard his own delightful environment.

One of the mob chanced to turn his head, and perceived the figure in the window. "Hello, lookit 'is whiskers," he said genially.

Many of the men turned then, and a shout went up. They called to him in all strange keys. They addressed him in every manner, from familiar and cordial greetings, to carefully-worded advice concerning changes in his personal appearance. The man presently fled, and the mob chuckled ferociously, like ogres who had just devoured something.

They turned then to serious business. Often they addressed the stolid front of the house.

"Oh, let us in fer Gawd's sake!"

"Let us in, or we'll all drop dead!"

"Say, what's th' use o' keepin' us poor Indians out in th' cold?"

And always some one was saying, "Keep off my feet."

The crushing of the crowd grew terrific toward the last. The men, in keen pain from the blasts, began almost to fight. With the pitiless whirl of snow upon them, the battle for shelter was going to the strong. It became known that the basement door at the foot of a little steep flight of stairs was the one to be opened, and they jostled and heaved in this direction like labouring fiends. One could hear them panting and groaning in their fierce exertion.

Usually some one in the front ranks was protesting to those in the rear--"O-o-ow! Oh, say now, fellers, let up, will yeh? Do yeh wanta kill somebody!"

A policeman arrived and went into the midst of them, scolding and be-rating, occasionally threatening, but using no force but that of his hands and shoulders against these men who were only struggling to get in out of the storm. His decisive tones rang out sharply--"Stop that pushin' back there! Come, boys, don't push! Stop that! Here you, quit yer shovin'! Cheese that!"

When the door below was opened, a thick stream of men forced a way down the stairs, which were of an extraordinary narrowness, and seemed only wide enough for one at a time. Yet they somehow went down almost three abreast. It was a difficult and painful operation. The crowd was like a turbulent water forcing itself through one tiny outlet. The men in the rear, excited by the success of the others, made frantic exertions,

for it seemed that this large band would more than fill the quarters, and that many would be left upon the pavements. It would be disastrous to be of the last, and accordingly men with the snow biting their faces, writhed and twisted with their might. One expected that from the tremendous pressure, the narrow passage to the basement door would be so choked and clogged with human limbs and bodies that movement would be impossible. Once indeed the crowd was forced to stop, and a cry went along that a man had been injured at the foot of the stairs. But presently the slow movement began again, and the policeman fought at the top of the flight to ease the pressure of those that were going down.

A reddish light from a window fell upon the faces of the men, when they, in turn, arrived at the last three steps, and were about to enter. One could then note a change of expression that had come over their features. As they stood thus upon the threshold of their hopes, they looked suddenly contented and complacent. The fire had passed from their eyes and the snarl had vanished from their lips. The very force of the crowd in the rear, which had previously vexed them, was regarded from another point of view, for it now made it inevitable that they should go through the little doors into the place that was cheery and warm with light.

The tossing crowd on the sidewalk grew smaller and smaller. The snow beat with merciless persistence upon the bowed heads of those who waited. The wind drove it up from the pavements in frantic forms of winding white, and it seethed in circles about the huddled forms passing in one by one, three by three, out of the storm.

THE McWILLIAMSES AND THE BURGLAR ALARM

the Project Gutenberg EBook of *The Mysterious Stranger and Other Stories*, by Mark Twain

The conversation drifted smoothly and pleasantly along from weather to crops, from crops to literature, from literature to scandal, from scandal to religion; then took a random jump, and landed on the subject of burglar alarms. And now for the first time Mr. McWilliams showed feeling. Whenever I perceive this sign on this man's dial, I comprehend it, and lapse into silence, and give him opportunity to unload his heart. Said he, with but ill-controlled emotion:

"I do not go one single cent on burglar alarms, Mr. Twain--not a single cent--and I will tell you why. When we were finishing our house, we found we had a little cash left over, on account of the plumber not knowing it. I was for enlightening the heathen with it, for I was always unaccountably down on the heathen somehow; but Mrs. McWilliams said no, let's have a burglar alarm. I agreed to this compromise. I will explain that whenever I want a thing, and Mrs. McWilliams wants another thing, and we decide upon the thing that Mrs. McWilliams wants--as we always do--she calls that a compromise. Very well: the man came up from New York and put in the alarm, and charged three hundred and twenty-five dollars for it, and said we could sleep without uneasiness now. So we did for awhile--say a month. Then one night we smelled smoke, and I was advised to get up and see what the matter was. I lit a candle, and started toward the stairs, and met a burglar coming out of a room with a basket of tinware, which he had mistaken for solid silver in the dark. He was smoking a pipe. I said, 'My friend, we do not allow smoking in this room.' He said he was a stranger, and could not be expected to know the rules of the house: said he had been in many houses just as good as this one, and it had never been objected to before. He added that as far as his experience went, such rules had never been considered to apply to burglars, anyway.

"I said: 'Smoke along, then, if it is the custom, though I think that the conceding of a privilege to a burglar which is denied to a bishop is a conspicuous sign of the looseness of the times. But waiving all that, what business have you to be entering this house in this furtive and clandestine way, without ringing the burglar alarm?'

"He looked confused and ashamed, and said, with embarrassment: 'I beg a thousand pardons. I did not know you had a burglar alarm, else I would have rung it. I beg you will not mention it where my parents may hear of it, for they are old and feeble, and such a seemingly wanton breach of the hallowed conventionalities of our Christian civilization might all too rudely sunder the frail bridge which hangs darkling between the pale and evanescent present and the solemn great deeps of the eternities. May I trouble you for a match?'

"I said: 'Your sentiments do you honor, but if you will allow me to say it, metaphor is not your best hold. Spare your thigh; this kind light only on the box, and seldom there, in fact, if my experience may be trusted. But to return to business: how did you get in here?'

"'Through a second-story window.'

"It was even so. I redeemed the tinware at pawnbroker's rates, less cost of advertising, bade the burglar good-night, closed the window after him, and retired to headquarters to report. Next morning we sent for the burglar-alarm man, and he came up and explained that the reason the alarm did not 'go off' was that no part of the house but the first floor was attached to the alarm. This was simply idiotic; one might as well have no armor on at all in battle as to have it only on his legs.

The expert now put the whole second story on the alarm, charged three hundred dollars for it, and went his way. By and by, one night, I found a burglar in the third story, about to start down a ladder with a lot of miscellaneous property. My first impulse was to crack his head with a billiard cue; but my second was to refrain from this attention, because he was between me and the cue rack. The second impulse was plainly the soundest, so I refrained, and proceeded to compromise. I redeemed the property at former rates, after deducting ten per cent. for use of ladder, it being my ladder, and, next day we sent down for the expert once more, and had the third story attached to the alarm, for three hundred dollars.

"By this time the 'annunciator' had grown to formidable dimensions. It had forty-seven tags on it, marked with the names of the various rooms and chimneys, and it occupied the space of an ordinary wardrobe. The gong was the size of a wash-bowl, and was placed above the head of our bed. There was a wire from the house to the coachman's quarters in the stable, and a noble gong alongside his pillow.

"We should have been comfortable now but for one defect. Every morning at five the cook opened the kitchen door, in the way of business, and rip went that gong! The first time this happened I thought the last day was come sure. I didn't think it in bed--no, but out of it--for the first effect of that frightful gong is to hurl you across the house, and slam you against the wall, and then curl you up, and squirm you like a spider on a stove lid, till somebody shuts the kitchen door. In solid fact, there is no clamor that is even remotely comparable to the dire clamor which that gong makes. Well, this catastrophe happened every morning regularly at five o'clock, and lost us three hours sleep; for, mind you, when that thing wakes you, it doesn't merely wake you in spots; it wakes you all over, conscience and all, and you are good for eighteen hours of wide-awakeness subsequently--eighteen hours of the very most inconceivable wide-awakeness that you ever experienced in your life. A stranger died on our hands one time, and we vacated and left him in our room overnight. Did that stranger wait for the general judgment? No, sir; he got up at five the next morning in the most prompt and unostentatious way. I knew he would; I knew it mighty well. He collected his life-insurance, and lived happy ever after, for there was plenty of

proof as to the perfect squareness of his death.

“Well, we were gradually fading toward a better land, on account of the daily loss of sleep; so we finally had the expert up again, and he ran a wire to the outside of the door, and placed a switch there, whereby Thomas, the butler, always made one little mistake--he switched the alarm off at night when he went to bed, and switched it on again at daybreak in the morning, just in time for the cook to open the kitchen door, and enable that gong to slam us across the house, sometimes breaking a window with one or the other of us. At the end of a week we recognized that this switch business was a delusion and a snare. We also discovered that a band of burglars had been lodging in the house the whole time--not exactly to steal, for there wasn't much left now, but to hide from the police, for they were hot pressed, and they shrewdly judged that the detectives would never think of a tribe of burglars taking sanctuary in a house notoriously protected by the most imposing and elaborate burglar alarm in America.

“Sent down for the expert again, and this time he struck a most dazzling idea--he fixed the thing so that opening the kitchen door would take off the alarm. It was a noble idea, and he charged accordingly. But you already foresee the result. I switched on the alarm every night at bed-time, no longer trusting on Thomas's frail memory; and as soon as the lights were out the burglars walked in at the kitchen door, thus taking the alarm off without waiting for the cook to do it in the morning. You see how aggravatingly we were situated. For months we couldn't have any company. Not a spare bed in the house; all occupied by burglars.

“Finally, I got up a cure of my own. The expert answered the call, and ran another ground wire to the stable, and established a switch there, so that the coachman could put on and take off the alarm. That worked first rate, and a season of peace ensued, during which we got to inviting company once more and enjoying life.

“But by and by the irrepressible alarm invented a new kink. One winter's night we were flung out of bed by the sudden music of that awful gong, and when we hobbled to the annunciator, turned up the gas, and saw the word 'Nursery' exposed, Mrs. McWilliams fainted dead away, and I came precious near doing the same thing myself. I seized my shotgun, and stood timing the coachman whilst that appalling buzzing went on. I knew that his gong had flung him out, too, and that he would be along with his gun as soon as he could jump into his clothes. When I judged that the time was ripe, I crept to the room next the nursery, glanced through the window, and saw the dim outline of the coachman in the yard below,

standing at present-arms and waiting for a chance. Then I hopped into the nursery and fired, and in the same instant the coachman fired at the red flash of my gun. Both of us were successful; I crippled a nurse, and he shot off all my back hair. We turned up the gas, and telephoned for a surgeon. There was not a sign of a burglar, and no window had been raised. One glass was absent, but that was where the coachman's charge had come through. Here was a fine mystery--a burglar alarm 'going off' at midnight of its own accord, and not a burglar in the neighborhood!

"The expert answered the usual call, and explained that it was a 'False alarm.' Said it was easily fixed. So he overhauled the nursery window, charged a remunerative figure for it, and departed.

"What we suffered from false alarms for the next three years no stylographic pen can describe. During the next three months I always flew with my gun to the room indicated, and the coachman always sallied forth with his battery to support me. But there was never anything to shoot at--windows all tight and secure. We always sent down for the expert next day, and he fixed those particular windows so they would keep quiet a week or so, and always remembered to send us a bill about like this:

Wire	\$2.15
Nipple.....	.75
Two hours' labor	1.50
Wax.....	.47
Tape.....	.34
Screws.....	.15
Recharging battery98
Three hours' labor	2.25
String.....	.02
Lard66
Pond's Extract	1.25
Springs at 50.....	2.00
Railroad fares.....	7.25

"At length a perfectly natural thing came about--after we had answered three or four hundred false alarms--to wit, we stopped answering them. Yes, I simply rose up calmly, when slammed across the house by the alarm, calmly inspected the annunciator, took note of the room indicated; and then calmly disconnected that room from the alarm, and went back to bed as if nothing had happened. Moreover, I left that room off permanently, and did not send for the expert. Well, it goes without saying that in the course of time all the rooms were taken off, and the

entire machine was out of service.

"It was at this unprotected time that the heaviest calamity of all happened. The burglars walked in one night and carried off the burglar alarm! yes, sir, every hide and hair of it: ripped it out, tooth and nail; springs, bells, gongs, battery, and all; they took a hundred and fifty miles of copper wire; they just cleaned her out, bag and baggage, and never left us a vestige of her to swear at--swear by, I mean.

"We had a time of it to get her back; but we accomplished it finally, for money. The alarm firm said that what we needed now was to have her put in right--with their new patent springs in the windows to make false alarms impossible, and their new patent clock attached to take off and put on the alarm morning and night without human assistance. That seemed a good scheme. They promised to have the whole thing finished in ten days. They began work, and we left for the summer. They worked a couple of days; then they left for the summer. After which the burglars moved in, and began their summer vacation. When we returned in the fall, the house was as empty as a beer closet in premises where painters have been at work. We refurnished, and then sent down to hurry up the expert. He came up and finished the job, and said: 'Now this clock is set to put on the alarm every night at 10, and take it off every morning at 5:45. All you've got to do is to wind her up every week, and then leave her alone--she will take care of the alarm herself.'

"After that we had a most tranquil season during three months. The bill was prodigious, of course, and I had said I would not pay it until the new machinery had proved itself to be flawless. The time stipulated was three months. So I paid the bill, and the very next day the alarm went to buzzing like ten thousand bee swarms at ten o'clock in the morning. I turned the hands around twelve hours, according to instructions, and this took off the alarm; but there was another hitch at night, and I had to set her ahead twelve hours once more to get her to put the alarm on again. That sort of nonsense went on a week or two, then the expert came up and put in a new clock. He came up every three months during the next three years, and put in a new clock. But it was always a failure. His clocks all had the same perverse defect: they would put the alarm on in the daytime, and they would not put it on at night; and if you forced it on yourself, they would take it off again the minute your back was turned.

"Now there is the history of that burglar alarm--everything just as it happened; nothing extenuated, and naught set down in malice. Yes, sir,--and when I had slept nine years with burglars, and maintained an expensive burglar alarm the whole time, for their protection, not mine,

and at my sole cost--for not a d---d cent could I ever get THEM to contribute--I just said to Mrs. McWilliams that I had had enough of that kind of pie; so with her full consent I took the whole thing out and traded it off for a dog, and shot the dog. I don't know what you think about it, Mr. Twain; but I think those things are made solely in the interest of the burglars. Yes, sir, a burglar alarm combines in its person all that is objectionable about a fire, a riot, and a harem, and at the same time had none of the compensating advantages, of one sort or another, that customarily belong with that combination. Good-by: I get off here."

VEROTCHKA

Project Gutenberg's *The Chorus Girl and Other Stories*, by Anton Chekhov

IVAN ALEXEYITCH OGNEV remembers how on that August evening he opened the glass door with a rattle and went out on to the verandah. He was wearing a light Inverness cape and a wide-brimmed straw hat, the very one that was lying with his top-boots in the dust under his bed. In one hand he had a big bundle of books and notebooks, in the other a thick knotted stick.

Behind the door, holding the lamp to show the way, stood the master of the house, Kuznetsov, a bald old man with a long grey beard, in a snow-white piqué jacket. The old man was smiling cordially and nodding his head.

"Good-bye, old fellow!" said Ognev.

Kuznetsov put the lamp on a little table and went out to the verandah. Two long narrow shadows moved down the steps towards the flower-beds, swayed to and fro, and leaned their heads on the trunks of the lime-trees.

"Good-bye and once more thank you, my dear fellow!" said Ivan Alexeyitch. "Thank you for your welcome, for your kindness, for your affection. . . . I shall never forget your hospitality as long as I live. You are so good, and your daughter is so good, and everyone here is so kind, so good-humoured and friendly . . . Such a splendid set of people that I don't know how to say what I feel!"

From excess of feeling and under the influence of the home-made

wine he had just drunk, Ognev talked in a singing voice like a divinity student, and was so touched that he expressed his feelings not so much by words as by the blinking of his eyes and the twitching of his shoulders. Kuznetsov, who had also drunk a good deal and was touched, craned forward to the young man and kissed him.

"I've grown as fond of you as if I were your dog," Ognev went on. "I've been turning up here almost every day; I've stayed the night a dozen times. It's dreadful to think of all the home-made wine I've drunk. And thank you most of all for your co-operation and help. Without you I should have been busy here over my statistics till October. I shall put in my preface: 'I think it my duty to express my gratitude to the President of the District Zemstvo of N---, Kuznetsov, for his kind co-operation.' There is a brilliant future before statistics! My humble respects to Vera Gavrilovna, and tell the doctors, both the lawyers and your secretary, that I shall never forget their help! And now, old fellow, let us embrace one another and kiss for the last time!"

Ognev, limp with emotion, kissed the old man once more and began going down the steps. On the last step he looked round and asked: "Shall we meet again some day?"

"God knows!" said the old man. "Most likely not!"

"Yes, that's true! Nothing will tempt you to Petersburg and I am never likely to turn up in this district again. Well, good-bye!"

"You had better leave the books behind!" Kuznetsov called after him. "You don't want to drag such a weight with you. I would send them by a servant to-morrow!"

But Ognev was rapidly walking away from the house and was not listening. His heart, warmed by the wine, was brimming over with good-humour, friendliness, and sadness. He walked along thinking how frequently one met with good people, and what a pity it was that nothing was left of those meetings but memories. At times one catches a glimpse of cranes on the horizon, and a faint gust of wind brings their plaintive, ecstatic cry, and a minute later, however greedily one scans the blue distance, one cannot see a speck nor catch a sound; and like that, people with their faces and their words flit through our lives and are drowned in the past, leaving nothing except faint traces in the memory. Having been in the N--- District from the early spring, and having been almost every day at the friendly Kuznetsovs', Ivan Alexeyitch had become as much at

home with the old man, his daughter, and the servants as though they were his own people; he had grown familiar with the whole house to the smallest detail, with the cosy verandah, the windings of the avenues, the silhouettes of the trees over the kitchen and the bath-house; but as soon as he was out of the gate all this would be changed to memory and would lose its meaning as reality for ever, and in a year or two all these dear images would grow as dim in his consciousness as stories he had read or things he had imagined.

"Nothing in life is so precious as people!" Ognev thought in his emotion, as he strode along the avenue to the gate. "Nothing!"

It was warm and still in the garden. There was a scent of the mignonette, of the tobacco-plants, and of the heliotrope, which were not yet over in the flower-beds. The spaces between the bushes and the tree-trunks were filled with a fine soft mist soaked through and through with moonlight, and, as Ognev long remembered, coils of mist that looked like phantoms slowly but perceptibly followed one another across the avenue. The moon stood high above the garden, and below it transparent patches of mist were floating eastward. The whole world seemed to consist of nothing but black silhouettes and wandering white shadows. Ognev, seeing the mist on a moonlight August evening almost for the first time in his life, imagined he was seeing, not nature, but a stage effect in which unskilful workmen, trying to light up the garden with white Bengal fire, hid behind the bushes and let off clouds of white smoke together with the light.

When Ognev reached the garden gate a dark shadow moved away from the low fence and came towards him.

"Vera Gavrilovna!" he said, delighted. "You here? And I have been looking everywhere for you; wanted to say good-bye. . . . Good-bye; I am going away!"

"So early? Why, it's only eleven o'clock."

"Yes, it's time I was off. I have a four-mile walk and then my packing. I must be up early to-morrow."

Before Ognev stood Kuznetsov's daughter Vera, a girl of one-and-twenty, as usual melancholy, carelessly dressed, and attractive. Girls who are dreamy and spend whole days lying down, lazily reading whatever they come across, who are bored and melancholy, are usually careless in their dress. To those of them who have been endowed by nature

with taste and an instinct of beauty, the slight carelessness adds a special charm. When Ognev later on remembered her, he could not picture pretty Verotchka except in a full blouse which was crumpled in deep folds at the belt and yet did not touch her waist; without her hair done up high and a curl that had come loose from it on her forehead; without the knitted red shawl with ball fringe at the edge which hung disconsolately on Vera's shoulders in the evenings, like a flag on a windless day, and in the daytime lay about, crushed up, in the hall near the men's hats or on a box in the dining-room, where the old cat did not hesitate to sleep on it. This shawl and the folds of her blouse suggested a feeling of freedom and laziness, of good-nature and sitting at home. Perhaps because Vera attracted Ognev he saw in every frill and button something warm, naïve, cosy, something nice and poetical, just what is lacking in cold, insincere women that have no instinct for beauty.

Verotchka had a good figure, a regular profile, and beautiful curly hair. Ognev, who had seen few women in his life, thought her a beauty.

"I am going away," he said as he took leave of her at the gate.
"Don't remember evil against me! Thank you for everything!"

In the same singing divinity student's voice in which he had talked to her father, with the same blinking and twitching of his shoulders, he began thanking Vera for her hospitality, kindness, and friendliness.

"I've written about you in every letter to my mother," he said. "If everyone were like you and your dad, what a jolly place the world would be! You are such a splendid set of people! All such genuine, friendly people with no nonsense about you."

"Where are you going to now?" asked Vera.

"I am going now to my mother's at Oryol; I shall be a fortnight with her, and then back to Petersburg and work."

"And then?"

"And then? I shall work all the winter and in the spring go somewhere into the provinces again to collect material. Well, be happy, live a hundred years . . . don't remember evil against me. We shall not see each other again."

Ognev stooped down and kissed Vera's hand. Then, in silent emotion,

he straightened his cape, shifted his bundle of books to a more comfortable position, paused, and said:

"What a lot of mist!"

"Yes. Have you left anything behind?"

"No, I don't think so. . . ."

For some seconds Ognev stood in silence, then he moved clumsily towards the gate and went out of the garden.

"Stay; I'll see you as far as our wood," said Vera, following him out.

They walked along the road. Now the trees did not obscure the view, and one could see the sky and the distance. As though covered with a veil all nature was hidden in a transparent, colourless haze through which her beauty peeped gaily; where the mist was thicker and whiter it lay heaped unevenly about the stones, stalks, and bushes or drifted in coils over the road, clung close to the earth and seemed trying not to conceal the view. Through the haze they could see all the road as far as the wood, with dark ditches at the sides and tiny bushes which grew in the ditches and caught the straying wisps of mist. Half a mile from the gate they saw the dark patch of Kuznetsov's wood.

"Why has she come with me? I shall have to see her back," thought Ognev, but looking at her profile he gave a friendly smile and said: "One doesn't want to go away in such lovely weather. It's quite a romantic evening, with the moon, the stillness, and all the etceteras. Do you know, Vera Gavrilovna, here I have lived twenty-nine years in the world and never had a romance. No romantic episode in my whole life, so that I only know by hearsay of rendezvous, 'avenues of sighs,' and kisses. It's not normal! In town, when one sits in one's lodgings, one does not notice the blank, but here in the fresh air one feels it. . . . One resents it!"

"Why is it?"

"I don't know. I suppose I've never had time, or perhaps it was I have never met women who. . . . In fact, I have very few acquaintances and never go anywhere."

For some three hundred paces the young people walked on in silence.

Ognev kept glancing at Verotchka's bare head and shawl, and days of spring and summer rose to his mind one after another. It had been a period when far from his grey Petersburg lodgings, enjoying the friendly warmth of kind people, nature, and the work he loved, he had not had time to notice how the sunsets followed the glow of dawn, and how, one after another foretelling the end of summer, first the nightingale ceased singing, then the quail, then a little later the landrail. The days slipped by unnoticed, so that life must have been happy and easy. He began calling aloud how reluctantly he, poor and unaccustomed to change of scene and society, had come at the end of April to the N---- District, where he had expected dreariness, loneliness, and indifference to statistics, which he considered was now the foremost among the sciences. When he arrived on an April morning at the little town of N---- he had put up at the inn kept by Ryabuhin, the Old Believer, where for twenty kopecks a day they had given him a light, clean room on condition that he should not smoke indoors. After resting and finding who was the president of the District Zemstvo, he had set off at once on foot to Kuznetsov. He had to walk three miles through lush meadows and young copses. Larks were hovering in the clouds, filling the air with silvery notes, and rooks flapping their wings with sedate dignity floated over the green cornland.

"Good heavens!" Ognev had thought in wonder; "can it be that there's always air like this to breathe here, or is this scent only to-day, in honour of my coming?"

Expecting a cold business-like reception, he went in to Kuznetsov's diffidently, looking up from under his eyebrows and shyly pulling his beard. At first Kuznetsov wrinkled up his brows and could not understand what use the Zemstvo could be to the young man and his statistics; but when the latter explained at length what was material for statistics and how such material was collected, Kuznetsov brightened, smiled, and with childish curiosity began looking at his notebooks. On the evening of the same day Ivan Alexeyitch was already sitting at supper with the Kuznetsovs, was rapidly becoming exhilarated by their strong home-made wine, and looking at the calm faces and lazy movements of his new acquaintances, felt all over that sweet, drowsy indolence which makes one want to sleep and stretch and smile; while his new acquaintances looked at him good-naturedly and asked him whether his father and mother were living, how much he earned a month, how often he went to the theatre. . . .

Ognev recalled his expeditions about the neighbourhood, the picnics,

the fishing parties, the visit of the whole party to the convent to see the Mother Superior Marfa, who had given each of the visitors a bead purse; he recalled the hot, endless typically Russian arguments in which the opponents, spluttering and banging the table with their fists, misunderstand and interrupt one another, unconsciously contradict themselves at every phrase, continually change the subject, and after arguing for two or three hours, laugh and say: "Goodness knows what we have been arguing about! Beginning with one thing and going on to another!"

"And do you remember how the doctor and you and I rode to Shestovo?" said Ivan Alexeyitch to Vera as they reached the copse. "It was there that the crazy saint met us: I gave him a five-kopeck piece, and he crossed himself three times and flung it into the rye. Good heavens! I am carrying away such a mass of memories that if I could gather them together into a whole it would make a good nugget of gold! I don't understand why clever, perceptive people crowd into Petersburg and Moscow and don't come here. Is there more truth and freedom in the Nevsky and in the big damp houses than here? Really, the idea of artists, scientific men, and journalists all living crowded together in furnished rooms has always seemed to me a mistake."

Twenty paces from the copse the road was crossed by a small narrow bridge with posts at the corners, which had always served as a resting-place for the Kuznetsovs and their guests on their evening walks. From there those who liked could mimic the forest echo, and one could see the road vanish in the dark woodland track.

"Well, here is the bridge!" said Ognev. "Here you must turn back."

Vera stopped and drew a breath.

"Let us sit down," she said, sitting down on one of the posts.

"People generally sit down when they say good-bye before starting on a journey."

Ognev settled himself beside her on his bundle of books and went on talking. She was breathless from the walk, and was looking, not at Ivan Alexeyitch, but away into the distance so that he could not see her face.

"And what if we meet in ten years' time?" he said. "What shall we be like then? You will be by then the respectable mother of a family, and I shall be the author of some weighty statistical work of no

use to anyone, as thick as forty thousand such works. We shall meet and think of old days. . . . Now we are conscious of the present; it absorbs and excites us, but when we meet we shall not remember the day, nor the month, nor even the year in which we saw each other for the last time on this bridge. You will be changed, perhaps Tell me, will you be different?"

Vera started and turned her face towards him.

"What?" she asked.

"I asked you just now. . . ."

"Excuse me, I did not hear what you were saying."

Only then Ognev noticed a change in Vera. She was pale, breathing fast, and the tremor in her breathing affected her hands and lips and head, and not one curl as usual, but two, came loose and fell on her forehead. . . . Evidently she avoided looking him in the face, and, trying to mask her emotion, at one moment fingered her collar, which seemed to be rasping her neck, at another pulled her red shawl from one shoulder to the other.

"I am afraid you are cold," said Ognev. "It's not at all wise to sit in the mist. Let me see you back _nach-haus_."

Vera sat mute.

"What is the matter?" asked Ognev, with a smile. "You sit silent and don't answer my questions. Are you cross, or don't you feel well?"

Vera pressed the palm of her hand to the cheek nearest to Ognev, and then abruptly jerked it away.

"An awful position!" she murmured, with a look of pain on her face. "Awful!"

"How is it awful?" asked Ognev, shrugging his shoulders and not concealing his surprise. "What's the matter?"

Still breathing hard and twitching her shoulders, Vera turned her back to him, looked at the sky for half a minute, and said:

"There is something I must say to you, Ivan Alexeyitch. . . ."

"I am listening."

"It may seem strange to you. . . . You will be surprised, but I don't care. . . ."

Ognev shrugged his shoulders once more and prepared himself to listen.

"You see . . ." Verotchka began, bowing her head and fingering a ball on the fringe of her shawl. "You see . . . this is what I wanted to tell you. . . . You'll think it strange . . . and silly, but I . . . can't bear it any longer."

Vera's words died away in an indistinct mutter and were suddenly cut short by tears. The girl hid her face in her handkerchief, bent lower than ever, and wept bitterly. Ivan Alexeyitch cleared his throat in confusion and looked about him hopelessly, at his wits' end, not knowing what to say or do. Being unused to the sight of tears, he felt his own eyes, too, beginning to smart.

"Well, what next!" he muttered helplessly. "Vera Gavrilovna, what's this for, I should like to know? My dear girl, are you . . . are you ill? Or has someone been nasty to you? Tell me, perhaps I could, so to say . . . help you. . . ."

When, trying to console her, he ventured cautiously to remove her hands from her face, she smiled at him through her tears and said:

"I . . . love you!"

These words, so simple and ordinary, were uttered in ordinary human language, but Ognev, in acute embarrassment, turned away from Vera, and got up, while his confusion was followed by terror.

The sad, warm, sentimental mood induced by leave-taking and the home-made wine suddenly vanished, and gave place to an acute and unpleasant feeling of awkwardness. He felt an inward revulsion; he looked askance at Vera, and now that by declaring her love for him she had cast off the aloofness which so adds to a woman's charm, she seemed to him, as it were, shorter, plainer, more ordinary.

"What's the meaning of it?" he thought with horror. "But I . . . do I love her or not? That's the question!"

And she breathed easily and freely now that the worst and most difficult thing was said. She, too, got up, and looking Ivan Alexeyitch straight in the face, began talking rapidly, warmly, irrepressibly.

As a man suddenly panic-stricken cannot afterwards remember the succession of sounds accompanying the catastrophe that overwhelmed him, so Ognev cannot remember Vera's words and phrases. He can only recall the meaning of what she said, and the sensation her words evoked in him. He remembers her voice, which seemed stifled and husky with emotion, and the extraordinary music and passion of her intonation. Laughing, crying with tears glistening on her eyelashes, she told him that from the first day of their acquaintance he had struck her by his originality, his intelligence, his kind intelligent eyes, by his work and objects in life; that she loved him passionately, deeply, madly; that when coming into the house from the garden in the summer she saw his cape in the hall or heard his voice in the distance, she felt a cold shudder at her heart, a foreboding of happiness; even his slightest jokes had made her laugh; in every figure in his note-books she saw something extraordinarily wise and grand; his knotted stick seemed to her more beautiful than the trees.

The copse and the wisps of mist and the black ditches at the side of the road seemed hushed listening to her, whilst something strange and unpleasant was passing in Ognev's heart. . . . Telling him of her love, Vera was enchantingly beautiful; she spoke eloquently and passionately, but he felt neither pleasure nor gladness, as he would have liked to; he felt nothing but compassion for Vera, pity and regret that a good girl should be distressed on his account. Whether he was affected by generalizations from reading or by the insuperable habit of looking at things objectively, which so often hinders people from living, but Vera's ecstasies and suffering struck him as affected, not to be taken seriously, and at the same time rebellious feeling whispered to him that all he was hearing and seeing now, from the point of view of nature and personal happiness, was more important than any statistics and books and truths. . . . And he raged and blamed himself, though he did not understand exactly where he was in fault.

To complete his embarrassment, he was absolutely at a loss what to say, and yet something he must say. To say bluntly, "I don't love you," was beyond him, and he could not bring himself to say "Yes," because however much he rummaged in his heart he could not find one spark of feeling in it. . . .

He was silent, and she meanwhile was saying that for her there was no greater happiness than to see him, to follow him wherever he liked this very moment, to be his wife and helper, and that if he went away from her she would die of misery.

"I cannot stay here!" she said, wringing her hands. "I am sick of the house and this wood and the air. I cannot bear the everlasting peace and aimless life, I can't endure our colourless, pale people, who are all as like one another as two drops of water! They are all good-natured and warm-hearted because they are all well-fed and know nothing of struggle or suffering, . . . I want to be in those big damp houses where people suffer, embittered by work and need. . ."

And this, too, seemed to Ognev affected and not to be taken seriously. When Vera had finished he still did not know what to say, but it was impossible to be silent, and he muttered:

"Vera Gavrilovna, I am very grateful to you, though I feel I've done nothing to deserve such . . . feeling . . . on your part. Besides, as an honest man I ought to tell you that . . . happiness depends on equality--that is, when both parties are . . . equally in love. . ."

But he was immediately ashamed of his mutterings and ceased. He felt that his face at that moment looked stupid, guilty, blank, that it was strained and affected. . . . Vera must have been able to read the truth on his countenance, for she suddenly became grave, turned pale, and bent her head.

"You must forgive me," Ognev muttered, not able to endure the silence. "I respect you so much that . . . it pains me. . ."

Vera turned sharply and walked rapidly homewards. Ognev followed her.

"No, don't!" said Vera, with a wave of her hand. "Don't come; I can go alone."

"Oh, yes . . . I must see you home anyway."

Whatever Ognev said, it all to the last word struck him as loathsome and flat. The feeling of guilt grew greater at every step. He raged inwardly, clenched his fists, and cursed his coldness and his

stupidity with women. Trying to stir his feelings, he looked at Verotchka's beautiful figure, at her hair and the traces of her little feet on the dusty road; he remembered her words and her tears, but all that only touched his heart and did not quicken his pulse.

"Ach! one can't force oneself to love," he assured himself, and at the same time he thought, "But shall I ever fall in love without? I am nearly thirty! I have never met anyone better than Vera and I never shall. . . . Oh, this premature old age! Old age at thirty!"

Vera walked on in front more and more rapidly, without looking back at him or raising her head. It seemed to him that sorrow had made her thinner and narrower in the shoulders.

"I can imagine what's going on in her heart now!" he thought, looking at her back. "She must be ready to die with shame and mortification! My God, there's so much life, poetry, and meaning in it that it would move a stone, and I . . . I am stupid and absurd!"

At the gate Vera stole a glance at him, and, shrugging and wrapping her shawl round her walked rapidly away down the avenue.

Ivan Alexeyitch was left alone. Going back to the copse, he walked slowly, continually standing still and looking round at the gate with an expression in his whole figure that suggested that he could not believe his own memory. He looked for Vera's footprints on the road, and could not believe that the girl who had so attracted him had just declared her love, and that he had so clumsily and bluntly "refused" her. For the first time in his life it was his lot to learn by experience how little that a man does depends on his own will, and to suffer in his own person the feelings of a decent kindly man who has against his will caused his neighbour cruel, undeserved anguish.

His conscience tormented him, and when Vera disappeared he felt as though he had lost something very precious, something very near and dear which he could never find again. He felt that with Vera a part of his youth had slipped away from him, and that the moments which he had passed through so fruitlessly would never be repeated.

When he reached the bridge he stopped and sank into thought. He wanted to discover the reason of his strange coldness. That it was due to something within him and not outside himself was clear to him. He frankly acknowledged to himself that it was not the

intellectual coldness of which clever people so often boast, not the coldness of a conceited fool, but simply impotence of soul, incapacity for being moved by beauty, premature old age brought on by education, his casual existence, struggling for a livelihood, his homeless life in lodgings. From the bridge he walked slowly, as it were reluctantly, into the wood. Here, where in the dense black darkness glaring patches of moonlight gleamed here and there, where he felt nothing except his thoughts, he longed passionately to regain what he had lost.

And Ivan Alexeyitch remembers that he went back again. Urging himself on with his memories, forcing himself to picture Vera, he strode rapidly towards the garden. There was no mist by then along the road or in the garden, and the bright moon looked down from the sky as though it had just been washed; only the eastern sky was dark and misty. . . . Ognev remembers his cautious steps, the dark windows, the heavy scent of heliotrope and mignonette. His old friend Karo, wagging his tail amicably, came up to him and sniffed his hand. This was the one living creature who saw him walk two or three times round the house, stand near Vera's dark window, and with a deep sigh and a wave of his hand walk out of the garden.

An hour later he was in the town, and, worn out and exhausted, leaned his body and hot face against the gatepost of the inn as he knocked at the gate. Somewhere in the town a dog barked sleepily, and as though in response to his knock, someone clanged the hour on an iron plate near the church.

"You prowl about at night," grumbled his host, the Old Believer, opening the door to him, in a long nightgown like a woman's. "You had better be saying your prayers instead of prowling about."

When Ivan Alexeyitch reached his room he sank on the bed and gazed a long, long time at the light. Then he tossed his head and began packing.

CHIPPINGS WITH A CHISEL

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Twice Told Tales*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Passing a summer several years since at Edgartown, on the island of Martha's Vineyard, I became acquainted with a certain carver of tombstones who had travelled and voyaged thither from the interior of

Massachusetts in search of professional employment. The speculation had turned out so successful that my friend expected to transmute slate and marble into silver and gold to the amount of at least a thousand dollars during the few months of his sojourn at Nantucket and the Vineyard. The secluded life and the simple and primitive spirit which still characterizes the inhabitants of those islands, especially of Martha's Vineyard, insure their dead friends a longer and dearer remembrance than the daily novelty and revolving bustle of the world can elsewhere afford to beings of the past. Yet, while every family is anxious to erect a memorial to its departed members, the untainted breath of Ocean bestows such health and length of days upon the people of the isles as would cause a melancholy dearth of business to a resident artist in that line. His own monument, recording his decease by starvation, would probably be an early specimen of his skill. Gravestones, therefore, have generally been an article of imported merchandise.

In my walks through the burial-ground of Edgartown--where the dead have lain so long that the soil, once enriched by their decay, has returned to its original barrenness--in that ancient burial-ground I noticed much variety of monumental sculpture. The elder stones, dated a century back or more, have borders elaborately carved with flowers and are adorned with a multiplicity of death's-heads, crossbones, scythes, hour-glasses, and other lugubrious emblems of mortality, with here and there a winged cherub to direct the mourner's spirit upward. These productions of Gothic taste must have been quite beyond the colonial skill of the day, and were probably carved in London and brought across the ocean to commemorate the defunct worthies of this lonely isle. The more recent monuments are mere slabs of slate in the ordinary style, without any superfluous flourishes to set off the bald inscriptions. But others--and those far the most impressive both to my taste and feelings--were roughly hewn from the gray rocks of the island, evidently by the unskilled hands of surviving friends and relatives. On some there were merely the initials of a name; some were inscribed with misspelt prose or rhyme, in deep letters which the moss and wintry rain of many years had not been able to obliterate. These, these were graves where loved ones slept. It is an old theme of satire, the falsehood and vanity of monumental eulogies; but when affection and sorrow grave the letters with their own painful labor, then we may be sure that they copy from the record on their hearts.

My acquaintance the sculptor--he may share that title with Greenough, since the dauber of signs is a painter as well as Raphael--had found a ready market for all his blank slabs of marble and full occupation in lettering and ornamenting them. He was an elderly man, a descendant of

the old Puritan family of Wigglesworth, with a certain simplicity and singleness both of heart and mind which, methinks, is more rarely found among us Yankees than in any other community of people. In spite of his gray head and wrinkled brow, he was quite like a child in all matters save what had some reference to his own business; he seemed, unless my fancy misled me, to view mankind in no other relation than as people in want of tombstones, and his literary attainments evidently comprehended very little either of prose or poetry which had not at one time or other been inscribed on slate or marble. His sole task and office among the immortal pilgrims of the tomb--the duty for which Providence had sent the old man into the world, as it were with a chisel in his hand--was to label the dead bodies, lest their names should be forgotten at the resurrection. Yet he had not failed, within a narrow scope, to gather a few sprigs of earthly, and more than earthly, wisdom--the harvest of many a grave. And, lugubrious as his calling might appear, he was as cheerful an old soul as health and integrity and lack of care could make him, and used to set to work upon one sorrowful inscription or another with that sort of spirit which impels a man to sing at his labor. On the whole, I found Mr. Wigglesworth an entertaining, and often instructive, if not an interesting, character; and, partly for the charm of his society, and still more because his work has an invariable attraction for "man that is born of woman," I was accustomed to spend some hours a day at his workshop. The quaintness of his remarks and their not infrequent truth--a truth condensed and pointed by the limited sphere of his view--gave a raciness to his talk which mere worldliness and general cultivation would at once have destroyed.

Sometimes we would discuss the respective merits of the various qualities of marble, numerous slabs of which were resting against the walls of the shop, or sometimes an hour or two would pass quietly without a word on either side while I watched how neatly his chisel struck out letter after letter of the names of the Nortons, the Mayhews, the Luces, the Daggets, and other immemorial families of the Vineyard. Often with an artist's pride the good old sculptor would speak of favorite productions of his skill which were scattered throughout the village graveyards of New England. But my chief and most instructive amusement was to witness his interviews with his customers, who held interminable consultations about the form and fashion of the desired monuments, the buried excellence to be commemorated, the anguish to be expressed, and finally the lowest price in dollars and cents for which a marble transcript of their feelings might be obtained. Really, my mind received many fresh ideas which perhaps may remain in it even longer than Mr. Wigglesworth's hardest marble will retain the deepest strokes of his chisel.

An elderly lady came to bespeak a monument for her first love, who had been killed by a whale in the Pacific Ocean no less than forty years before. It was singular that so strong an impression of early feeling should have survived through the changes of her subsequent life, in the course of which she had been a wife and a mother, and, so far as I could judge, a comfortable and happy woman. Reflecting within myself, it appeared to me that this lifelong sorrow--as, in all good faith, she deemed it--was one of the most fortunate circumstances of her history. It had given an ideality to her mind; it had kept her purer and less earthy than she would otherwise have been by drawing a portion of her sympathies apart from earth. Amid the throng of enjoyments and the pressure of worldly care and all the warm materialism of this life she had communed with a vision, and had been the better for such intercourse. Faithful to the husband of her maturity, and loving him with a far more real affection than she ever could have felt for this dream of her girlhood, there had still been an imaginative faith to the ocean-buried; so that an ordinary character had thus been elevated and refined. Her sighs had been the breath of Heaven to her soul. The good lady earnestly desired that the proposed monument should be ornamented with a carved border of marine plants intertwined with twisted sea-shells, such as were probably waving over her lover's skeleton or strewn around it in the far depths of the Pacific. But, Mr. Wigglesworth's chisel being inadequate to the task, she was forced to content herself with a rose hanging its head from a broken stem.

After her departure I remarked that the symbol was none of the most apt.

"And yet," said my friend the sculptor, embodying in this image the thoughts that had been passing through my own mind, "that broken rose has shed its sweet smell through forty years of the good woman's life."

It was seldom that I could find such pleasant food for contemplation as in the above instance. None of the applicants, I think, affected me more disagreeably than an old man who came, with his fourth wife hanging on his arm, to bespeak gravestones for the three former occupants of his marriage-bed. I watched with some anxiety to see whether his remembrance of either were more affectionate than of the other two, but could discover no symptom of the kind. The three monuments were all to be of the same material and form, and each decorated in bas-relief with two weeping willows, one of these sympathetic trees bending over its fellow, which was to be broken in

the midst and rest upon a sepulchral urn. This, indeed, was Mr. Wigglesworth's standing emblem of conjugal bereavement. I shuddered at the gray polygamist who had so utterly lost the holy sense of individuality in wedlock that methought he was fain to reckon upon his fingers how many women who had once slept by his side were now sleeping in their graves. There was even--if I wrong him, it is no great matter--a glance sidelong at his living spouse, as if he were inclined to drive a thriftier bargain by bespeaking four gravestones in a lot.

I was better pleased with a rough old whaling-captain who gave directions for a broad marble slab divided into two compartments, one of which was to contain an epitaph on his deceased wife and the other to be left vacant till death should engrave his own name there. As is frequently the case among the whalers of Martha's Vineyard, so much of this storm-beaten widower's life had been tossed away on distant seas that out of twenty years of matrimony he had spent scarce three, and those at scattered intervals, beneath his own roof. Thus the wife of his youth, though she died in his and her declining age, retained the bridal dewdrops fresh around her memory.

My observations gave me the idea, and Mr. Wigglesworth confirmed it, that husbands were more faithful in setting up memorials to their dead wives than widows to their dead husbands. I was not ill-natured enough to fancy that women less than men feel so sure of their own constancy as to be willing to give a pledge of it in marble. It is more probably the fact that, while men are able to reflect upon their lost companions as remembrances apart from themselves, women, on the other hand, are conscious that a portion of their being has gone with the departed whithersoever he has gone. Soul clings to soul, the living dust has a sympathy with the dust of the grave; and by the very strength of that sympathy the wife of the dead shrinks the more sensitively from reminding the world of its existence. The link is already strong enough; it needs no visible symbol. And, though a shadow walks ever by her side and the touch of a chill hand is on her bosom, yet life, and perchance its natural yearnings, may still be warm within her and inspire her with new hopes of happiness. Then would she mark out the grave the scent of which would be perceptible on the pillow of the second bridal? No, but rather level its green mound with the surrounding earth, as if, when she dug up again her buried heart, the spot had ceased to be a grave.

Yet, in spite of these sentimentalities, I was prodigiously amused by an incident of which I had not the good-fortune to be a witness, but which Mr. Wigglesworth related with considerable humor. A gentlewoman

of the town, receiving news of her husband's loss at sea, had bespoken a handsome slab of marble, and came daily to watch the progress of my friend's chisel. One afternoon, when the good lady and the sculptor were in the very midst of the epitaph--which the departed spirit might have been greatly comforted to read--who should walk into the workshop but the deceased himself, in substance as well as spirit! He had been picked up at sea, and stood in no present need of tombstone or epitaph.

"And how," inquired I, "did his wife bear the shock of joyful surprise?"

"Why," said the old man, deepening the grin of a death's-head on which his chisel was just then employed, "I really felt for the poor woman; it was one of my best pieces of marble--and to be thrown away on a living man!"

A comely woman with a pretty rosebud of a daughter came to select a gravestone for a twin-daughter, who had died a month before. I was impressed with the different nature of their feelings for the dead. The mother was calm and woefully resigned, fully conscious of her loss, as of a treasure which she had not always possessed, and therefore had been aware that it might be taken from her; but the daughter evidently had no real knowledge of what Death's doings were. Her thoughts knew, but not her heart. It seemed to me that by the print and pressure which the dead sister had left upon the survivor's spirit her feelings were almost the same as if she still stood side by side and arm in arm with the departed, looking at the slabs of marble, and once or twice she glanced around with a sunny smile, which, as its sister-smile had faded for ever, soon grew confusedly overshadowed. Perchance her consciousness was truer than her reflection; perchance her dead sister was a closer companion than in life.

The mother and daughter talked a long while with Mr. Wigglesworth about a suitable epitaph, and finally chose an ordinary verse of ill-matched rhymes which had already been inscribed upon innumerable tombstones. But when we ridicule the triteness of monumental verses, we forget that Sorrow reads far deeper in them than we can, and finds a profound and individual purport in what seems so vague and inexpressive unless interpreted by her. She makes the epitaph anew, though the selfsame words may have served for a thousand graves.

"And yet," said I afterward to Mr. Wigglesworth, "they might have made a better choice than this. While you were discussing the subject I was struck by at least a dozen simple and natural expressions from the

lips of both mother and daughter. One of these would have formed an inscription equally original and appropriate."

"No, no!" replied the sculptor, shaking his head; "there is a good deal of comfort to be gathered from these little old scraps of poetry, and so I always recommend them in preference to any new-fangled ones. And somehow they seem to stretch to suit a great grief and shrink to fit a small one."

It was not seldom that ludicrous images were excited by what took place between Mr. Wigglesworth and his customers. A shrewd gentlewoman who kept a tavern in the town was anxious to obtain two or three gravestones for the deceased members of her family, and to pay for these solemn commodities by taking the sculptor to board. Hereupon a fantasy arose in my mind of good Mr. Wigglesworth sitting down to dinner at a broad, flat tombstone carving one of his own plump little marble cherubs, gnawing a pair of crossbones and drinking out of a hollow death's-head or perhaps a lachrymatory vase or sepulchral urn, while his hostess's dead children waited on him at the ghastly banquet. On communicating this nonsensical picture to the old man he laughed heartily and pronounced my humor to be of the right sort.

"I have lived at such a table all my days," said he, "and eaten no small quantity of slate and marble."

"Hard fare," rejoined I, smiling, "but you seemed to have found it excellent of digestion, too."

A man of fifty or thereabouts with a harsh, unpleasant countenance ordered a stone for the grave of his bitter enemy, with whom he had waged warfare half a lifetime, to their mutual misery and ruin. The secret of this phenomenon was that hatred had become the sustenance and enjoyment of the poor wretch's soul; it had supplied the place of all kindly affections; it had been really a bond of sympathy between himself and the man who shared the passion; and when its object died, the unappeasable foe was the only mourner for the dead. He expressed a purpose of being buried side by side with his enemy.

"I doubt whether their dust will mingle," remarked the old sculptor to me; for often there was an earthliness in his conceptions.

"Oh yes," replied I, who had mused long upon the incident; "and when they rise again, these bitter foes may find themselves dear friends. Methinks what they mistook for hatred was but love under a mask."

A gentleman of antiquarian propensities provided a memorial for an Indian of Chabbiquidick--one of the few of untainted blood remaining in that region, and said to be a hereditary chieftain descended from the sachem who welcomed Governor Mayhew to the Vineyard. Mr. Wigglesworth exerted his best skill to carve a broken bow and scattered sheaf of arrows in memory of the hunters and warriors whose race was ended here, but he likewise sculptured a cherub, to denote that the poor Indian had shared the Christian's hope of immortality.

"Why," observed I, taking a perverse view of the winged boy and the bow and arrows, "it looks more like Cupid's tomb than an Indian chief's."

"You talk nonsense," said the sculptor, with the offended pride of art. He then added with his usual good-nature, "How can Cupid die when there are such pretty maidens in the Vineyard?"

"Very true," answered I; and for the rest of the day I thought of other matters than tombstones.

At our next meeting I found him chiselling an open book upon a marble headstone, and concluded that it was meant to express the erudition of some black-letter clergyman of the Cotton Mather school. It turned out, however, to be emblematical of the scriptural knowledge of an old woman who had never read anything but her Bible, and the monument was a tribute to her piety and good works from the orthodox church of which she had been a member. In strange contrast with this Christian woman's memorial was that of an infidel whose gravestone, by his own direction, bore an avowal of his belief that the spirit within him would be extinguished like a flame, and that the nothingness whence he sprang would receive him again.

Mr. Wigglesworth consulted me as to the propriety of enabling a dead man's dust to utter this dreadful creed.

"If I thought," said he, "that a single mortal would read the inscription without a shudder, my chisel should never cut a letter of it. But when the grave speaks such falsehoods, the soul of man will know the truth by its own horror."

"So it will," said I, struck by the idea. "The poor infidel may strive to preach blasphemies from his grave, but it will be only another method of impressing the soul with a consciousness of immortality."

There was an old man by the name of Norton, noted throughout the

island for his great wealth, which he had accumulated by the exercise of strong and shrewd faculties combined with a most penurious disposition. This wretched miser, conscious that he had not a friend to be mindful of him in his grave, had himself taken the needful precautions for posthumous remembrance by bespeaking an immense slab of white marble with a long epitaph in raised letters, the whole to be as magnificent as Mr. Wigglesworth's skill could make it. There was something very characteristic in this contrivance to have his money's worth even from his own tombstone, which, indeed, afforded him more enjoyment in the few months that he lived thereafter than it probably will in a whole century, now that it is laid over his bones.

This incident reminds me of a young girl--a pale, slender, feeble creature most unlike the other rosy and healthful damsels of the Vineyard, amid whose brightness she was fading away. Day after day did the poor maiden come to the sculptor's shop and pass from one piece of marble to another, till at last she pencilled her name upon a slender slab which, I think, was of a more spotless white than all the rest. I saw her no more, but soon afterward found Mr. Wigglesworth cutting her virgin-name into the stone which she had chosen.

"She is dead, poor girl!" said he, interrupting the tune which he was whistling, "and she chose a good piece of stuff for her headstone. Now, which of these slabs would you like best to see your own name upon?"

"Why, to tell you the truth, my good Mr. Wigglesworth," replied I, after a moment's pause, for the abruptness of the question had somewhat startled me--"to be quite sincere with you, I care little or nothing about a stone for my own grave, and am somewhat inclined to scepticism as to the propriety of erecting monuments at all over the dust that once was human. The weight of these heavy marbles, though unfelt by the dead corpse or the enfranchised soul, presses drearily upon the spirit of the survivor and causes him to connect the idea of death with the dungeon-like imprisonment of the tomb, instead of with the freedom of the skies. Every gravestone that you ever made is the visible symbol of a mistaken system. Our thoughts should soar upward with the butterfly, not linger with the exuviae that confined him. In truth and reason, neither those whom we call the living, and still less the departed, have anything to do with the grave."

"I never heard anything so heathenish," said Mr. Wigglesworth, perplexed and displeased at sentiments which controverted all his notions and feelings and implied the utter waste, and worse, of his whole life's labor. "Would you forget your dead friends the moment

they are under the sod?"

"They are not under the sod," I rejoined; "then why should I mark the spot where there is no treasure hidden? Forget them? No; but, to remember them aright, I would forget what they have cast off. And to gain the truer conception of death I would forget the grave."

But still the good old sculptor murmured, and stumbled, as it were, over the gravestones amid which he had walked through life. Whether he were right or wrong, I had grown the wiser from our companionship and from my observations of nature and character as displayed by those who came, with their old griefs or their new ones, to get them recorded upon his slabs of marble. And yet with my gain of wisdom I had likewise gained perplexity; for there was a strange doubt in my mind whether the dark shadowing of this life, the sorrows and regrets, have not as much real comfort in them--leaving religious influences out of the question--as what we term life's joys.

THE FREIGHTER'S DREAM, by Ida M. Huntington The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Prairie Gold*, by Various

"Squeak! Squ-e-a-k! Scr-e-e-ch!" The shrill, monotonous sound rent the hot noontide air like a wail of complaint.

"Thar she goes ag'in, a-cussin' of her driver!" grumbled old Hi, as he walked at the head of his lead oxen, Poly and Bony, with Buck and Berry panting behind them. "Jest listen at her! An' 'twas only day afore yistiddy that I put in a hull half hour a-greasin of her. Wal, she'll hev to fuss till mornin'. We ain't got no time to stop a minute in this hot place. If we make the springs afore the beasteses gin out 'twill be more'n I look fer!"

Old Hi anxiously gazed ahead, trying to see through the shimmering haze of the desert the far-distant little spot of ground where bubbled up the precious spring by which they might halt for rest and refreshment. "G'lang, Poly! That's right, Bony! Keep it up, ol' fellers!" Hi strove to encourage the patient oxen as they plodded wearily along through the fearful heat and the suffocating clouds of fine alkali dust.

For weeks the long train of covered wagons had moved steadily westward over the dim trails. Starting away back in Ohio, loaded with

necessities for the prospectors in the far West, they had crossed the fertile prairies, stuck in the muddy sloughs, forded the swollen rivers, rumbled over the plains and wound in and out the mountain passes. Now they were crawling over the desert, man and beast almost exhausted, even the seasoned wagons seeming to protest against the strain put upon them.

All that afternoon Hi walked with his oxen, talking and whistling, as much to keep up his own courage as to quicken their pace. For a few moments at a time they would rest, and then onward again towards the springs indicated on the map by which they traveled.

Half blind and dizzy from the dust and heat, sometimes Hi stumbled and staggered and nearly fell. He dared not turn to see how it fared with the men and teams behind him. Wrecks of wagons and bones of oxen by the side of the trail told an all-too-plain story. Some there were in every train who dropped by the way; men who raved in fever and died calling for water; faithful oxen who were shot to put them out of misery. Wagons were abandoned with their valuable freight when the teams could no longer pull them.

All afternoon they crept forward; the reiterating "Squeak! Squ-e-a-k! Scr-e-e-ch!" of the wagon sounded like a maddened human voice to poor Hi, fevered and half delirious.

At last the sun sank like a ball of fire in the haze. A cool breath of air sighed across the plain. The prairie dogs barked from their burrows. The coyotes yapped in the distance. But not yet could the long train stop, for rest without water meant death.

Far into the night the white-topped wagons crept on like specters. No sound was heard except that of the plodding feet of the oxen, the rumble of the heavy wagons and the "Squeak! Squ-e-a-k! Scr-e-e-ch!" that had troubled Hi since noon. Suddenly the oxen lifted their heads, sniffed the air eagerly, and without urging quickened their pace.

"What is it, ol' fellers?" asked Hi, as hope revived. "Is it the water ye are smellin'? Stiddy, thar! Stiddy!"

A few moments more, and Hi gave a shout of joy that was taken up and sounded down the line. "The spring! The spring!"

A halt was made. Every drop of the precious water was carefully portioned out so that each might have his share. Preparations were made for the night. The wagons were pulled up in a circle. The oxen were

carefully secured that they might not wander away. Here and there a flickering little fire was seen as the scanty "grub" was cooked. After Hi had bolted his share he wrapped himself in his blanket and lay down near his wagon. The large white top loomed dimly before him in the darkness.

A little while he stretched and twisted and turned uneasily until his tired muscles relaxed. In his ears yet seemed to sound the "Squeak! Squ-e-a-k! Scr-e-e-ch!" of the complaining wagon as it had bothered him all afternoon. "Darn ye! Won't ye ever shet up?" he muttered as he drifted off to sleep.

"Won't I ever shet up? I won't till I git good and ready!" The sharp, shrill voice made Hi open his eyes with a start. Above him leaned the huge form of an old woman in a white cap drawn close about her wrinkled, seamed face, only partly distinguishable in the darkness. As he lay blinking, trying to see her more plainly, the high falsetto voice continued its plaint.

"Won't I ever shet up? A nice way thet is to talk to me, Hi Smith! Do I iver grumble and snarl when ye treat me right? Hain't I been faithful to ye through thick an' thin? Hain't I made a home fer ye all this hull endurin' trip? Hain't I looked after yer grub and yer blankets and done ever'thin' I could to make ye comfortable? Hain't I kep' the rain offen ye at night? An' thet time the Injuns was after ye, didn't I stand atween ye an' the redskins and pertect ye? Didn't I keep ye from gittin' drowned when ye crossed thet river whar the current swep' the beasteses offen their feet? Didn't I watch over ye and shield ye from the sun when ye lay sick of the fever and hadn't nary wife to look after ye? Hain't I follered after them dumb beasteses through mud and water and over gravel and through clouds of alkali dust thick enough to choke a person, and niver said a word? An' now, jest bekase I'm fair swizzled up with the heat and ye fergit to give me some grease to rub on my achin' j'int, ye cuss me! Yis, I heerd ye! Ye needn't deny it! A-cussin' of me who has taken the place of home an' mother to ye fer years! I heerd ye! I he-e-rd ye! What d'ye mean, I say!" And the tirade ended in a perfect screech of anger.

Thoroughly aroused, Hi rolled over and jumped hastily to his feet. He looked all around. The old woman had mysteriously vanished. A coyotte sneaked past him. Day was breaking in the east. The first gleam of light fell on the white-topped wagon drawn up beside him.

He rubbed his eyes. "Wal, I swan!" he muttered, as he gazed bewilderedly at the close-drawn white top looming above him. "Glad I

woke up airly! I'll hev time ter grease that thar wagon afore we
start!"

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